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ABSTRACT

Seven schools each in five Florida school districts were examined after they had received a rating of F by the state's accountability plan. The ratings are based on Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test levels for reading, math, and writing as well as attendance-related data. Using criteria developed by the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive School reform, this review attempted to determine through interviews and surveys whether the initiatives in use at the school were based on accepted practices. After surveying these schools, some general conclusions were made. School districts may benefit from privatizing some services. Florida's accountability system lacks meaningful accountability measures in Exceptional Student Education, the first two years of ESL, Vocational Education, Fiscal Efficiency, and Readiness between school levels. A simpler and more standardized method of data collection should be established. Better indicators of parental involvement should be developed. Reading scores remained relatively constant with math and writing most improved. Performance indicators are mixed, with low reading scores and low graduation rates primary concerns. In general, the accountability of school districts needs to be similar from school to school, and current performance measures and benchmarks are insufficient. (RKJ)

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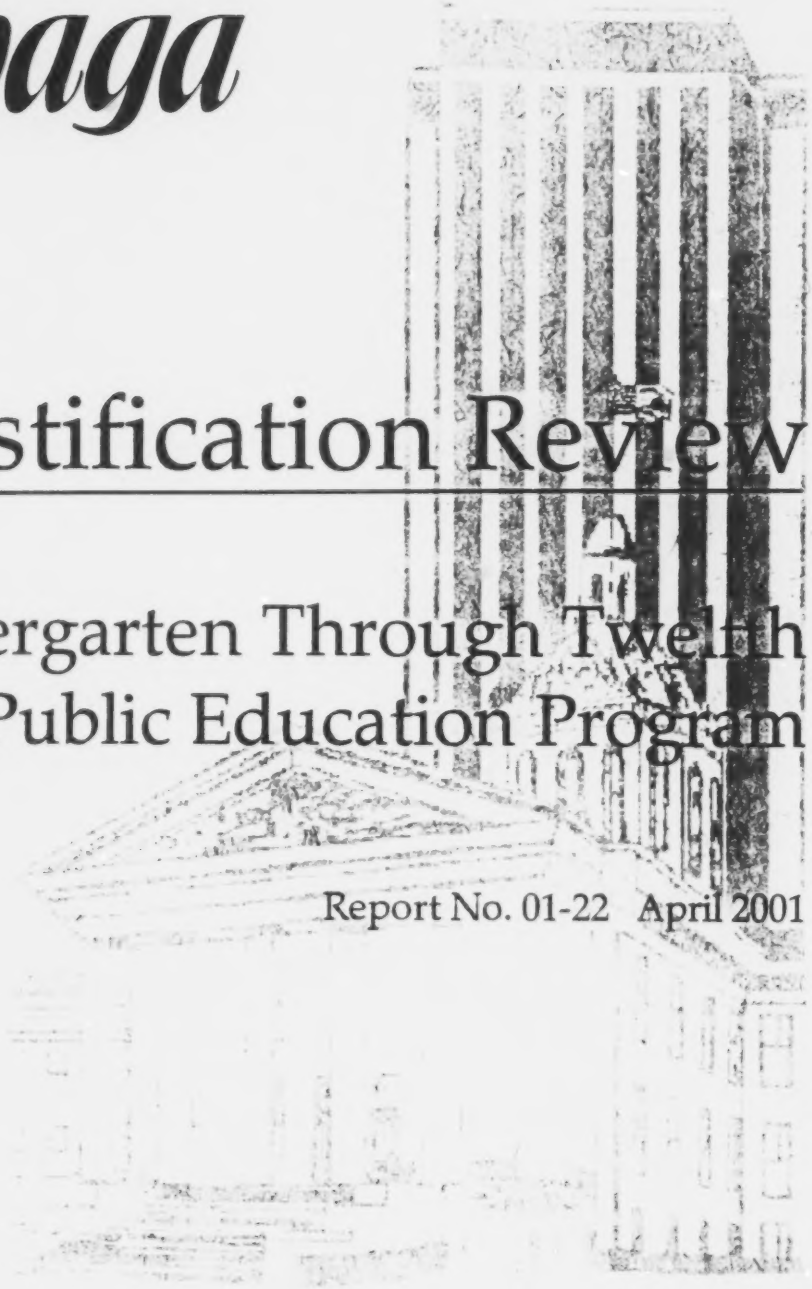

Justification Review

Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program

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Justification Review

Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program

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The Florida Legislature

OFFICE OF PROGRAM POLICY ANALYSIS AND GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

John W. Turcotte, Director

April 2001

The President of the Senate,
the Speaker of the House of Representatives,
and the Joint Legislative Auditing Committee

I have directed that a program evaluation and justification review be made of the Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program administered by the 67 district school boards with oversight and technical assistance provided by the Florida Department of Education. The results of this review are presented to you in this report. This review was made as a part of a series of justification reviews to be conducted by OPPAGA under the Government Performance and Accountability Act of 1994. This review was conducted by David Summers, Pamela Allen, and Mark Frederick, under the supervision of Jane Fletcher.

We wish to express our appreciation to the staff of the Florida Department of Education and the school districts for their assistance.

Sincerely,

John W. Turcotte
Director

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary i

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Chapter 2: Program Benefit, Placement, and Potential for Privatization 9

Chapter 3: The K-12 Accountability System Is Still Being Refined 12

Chapter 4: School Grades Improve; Other Areas Need Strengthening 22

Chapter 5: Schools Taking Reasonable Steps to Address Academic Priorities 35

Chapter 6: School Districts' Accountability Systems Need to Be Strengthened 46

Chapter 7: School Districts Can Save Money by Improving Management 54

Appendix A: Statutory Requirements for Program Evaluation and Justification Review 62

Appendix B: Methodology 65

Appendix C: Grading Criteria Used in Current School Accountability System 66

Appendix D: Best Financial Management Practices for Performance Accountability Systems 74

Appendix E: School District Reviews Have Identified Common Cost Savings 77

Appendix F: Response from the Department of Education 79

Executive Summary

Justification Review of the Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program

Purpose

This report presents the results of OPPAGA's program evaluation and justification review of the Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade (K-12) Public Education Program. The 1994 Government Performance and Accountability Act directs OPPAGA to conduct justification reviews of each program during its second year of operation under a performance-based budget. OPPAGA is to review agency performance measures, evaluate program performance, and identify policy alternatives for improving services and reducing costs.

Background

The purpose of the K-12 Public Education Program is to ensure that each student has an equal opportunity to attain the highest levels of educational achievement, and to assist in preparing students to successfully participate in the workforce and pursue postsecondary education. Florida law requires that public education be a function and responsibility of the state. As such, the state retains the responsibility for establishing minimum standards and regulations to ensure efficient operation of schools and adequate educational opportunities for all children. Each of the state's 67 counties constitutes a school district governed by an elected school board. During the 1999-2000 school year, school districts provided public education to approximately 2.4 million K-12 students through a system of 3,585 schools, including 113 charter schools and 4 university research schools. For Fiscal Year 2000-01, the program was funded with over $15 billion and during the 1999-2000 school year (the latest year data is available), school districts were staffed with 268,983 positions.

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General Conclusions and Recommendations

The K-12 Public Education Program and associated funding is beneficial to the state and should be continued. The state's constitution requires Florida's system of public education to be a uniform, efficient, safe, and high quality system of free and public schools. In addition, education, as a "public good," benefits all Florida citizens, not just the individuals receiving education. The vast majority of Florida's school-age children attend public schools compared to those attending private or home schools.

In general, there is minimal unnecessary duplication within the K-12 education delivery system. The K-12 Public Education Program should remain in the Department of Education and within the school districts because placement in another agency would not likely offer any significant benefits to students or to the state. While the state's constitution prohibits school districts from splitting into separate districts, it allows two or more school districts to operate and finance joint educational programs. Some smaller school districts may benefit from collaborating or merging with adjacent school districts.

Although the constitution mandates a system of free and public schools, several opportunities for choice and privatization exist within the current system. Currently, Florida citizens may choose not to participate in the public education system and to pay tuition to send their children to a private school or to home school their children. In addition, alternative education centers and Juvenile Justice Centers have a long history of privatization.

Florida's education accountability system is in a state of change. Many of the components of the current system were enacted in 1999 as part of the A+ Plan, and other components are in the process of being implemented. The A+ Plan does a reasonably good job of holding schools accountable. The state's educational accountability system could be further strengthened by holding districts more accountable for student performance. In addition, the system is lacking measures in five areas.

- Exceptional Student Education
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (for the first two years students are in this program)
- Vocational Education
- Fiscal Efficiency (district level)
- Articulation/Readiness between school levels

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The department should identify additional performance measures

To improve the state's accountability system for K-12 education, we **recommend** that the Department of Education work with the Legislature and the Education Governance Reorganization Transition Task Force to identify and implement measures for major program areas not included in Florida's current accountability system (i.e., Exceptional Student Education, English for Speakers of Other Languages (for the first two years students are in this program), Vocational Education, Fiscal Efficiency (district level), and Articulation/Readiness between school levels).

School performance grades have increased, but need to be interpreted with caution

Florida school performance grades have improved significantly in the past two years. Most notably, a large number of elementary schools improved, as did schools that formerly received a grade of F. In addition, writing and math scores have increased while reading scores showed relatively small gains during this period. However, some student performance problems, notably low student performance on national tests, a low graduation rate, and high remediation needs of graduates who enter community colleges, indicates much work remains to maximize student performance.

School grades and student test scores are improving statewide. While this is encouraging, several factors limit definitive conclusions being drawn based on this data. To assess annual learning gains, the system currently tests different groups of children each year rather than the same children over time, and testing processes have changed each year. Until information on individual student learning gains over time is available, the extent to which school performance is actually improving toward state expectations is not clear. **We suggest** that the Legislature continue to develop and implement its accountability system for public schools. Several positive changes planned during the next few years such as higher achievement level cutoff scores and the calculation of individual student learning gains (i.e., the value-added system) will strengthen accountability.

The department should report factors affecting performance

To allow meaningful interpretation of program performance information, **we recommend** that the Department of Education make known the effect of changes to the state accountability system when reporting program performance so that the public can readily determine whether changes in performance were due to student achievement or were due to changes to the accountability system.

The inspector general should improve and implement his monitoring plan

To ensure that accountability data is accurate and reliable, **we recommend** that the Department of Education's inspector general improve and implement his monitoring plan. The department's inspector general should further revise the plan to describe how program performance data will be monitored to ensure it is maintained and supported by agency records.

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The schools are focusing primarily on subjects tested by FCAT

Schools are responding to the A+ plan by focusing on implementing initiatives to improve student performance primarily in reading, writing, and math, the areas tested by the FCAT and on which school grades are based. Schools and districts are using a variety of programs to increase reading, writing, and math scores. While some of these initiatives are focused on helping previously non-proficient children become proficient in reading, writing, and math, others are directed at increasing FCAT scores through teaching test-taking strategies. Several school-level barriers need to be addressed to improve student performance. We identified these barriers based on our interviews, surveys, and observations during project fieldwork. These barriers include a lack of reliable research at schools on initiatives that are effective at increasing student performance; timing of the school improvement planning process; lack of parent involvement; teacher retention and recruitment problems; and low student readiness at all grade levels.

Once current legislation is fully implemented, many of the barriers to improving student performance should be resolved. However, there are several areas in need of improvement. Schools have a difficult time researching strategies to improve student performance and getting parents involved with their children's education. In addition, the school improvement and planning process needs to be better aligned to make the resulting plans more useful.

The department should develop a research bank on effective strategies

To improve the effectiveness of academic programs, **we recommend** that the Department of Education work with school districts and consult with the State Technology Office and OPPAGA to improve the dissemination of effective strategies that increase student performance through a web-based research bank. This research bank would house research on both state and national topics needed by school-based personnel in order to make well-informed, research-based decisions, including valid and reliable information on individual program effectiveness and efficiency, when available.

The department should develop performance measures for parental involvement

To improve parental involvement in student education, **we recommend** that the Office of Family Involvement within the Department of Education work with individual school districts to develop district indicators to measure parental involvement in the schools. Such measures could include the number and type of parental outreach programs schools implement, attendance rates at parent-teacher conferences, and the number of hours parents work in volunteer activities.

The department should assist school districts to better align planning and accountability processes

To improve the usefulness of existing planning mechanisms, we **recommend** that the Department of Education, with input from OPPAGA, assist school districts in aligning all aspects of the school improvement and planning process. If the school improvement and planning process has all aspects aligned (i.e., school improvement plans,

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academic assistance and intervention plans, district improvement plans, and district strategic plans are all aligned with each other as well as with the school and district budget process), the process will be more thorough, complete, and useful.

School districts generally do a poor job demonstrating efficient and effective use of resources

While the A+ plan provides a good basis for assessing statewide educational achievement and the performance of individual public schools, the plan is not designed to assess the performance of school districts. Our prior reviews have shown that school districts do a poor job demonstrating that the decisions they make and the services and programs they provide are efficient and effective. Like other publicly funded entities, school districts should be held accountable to parents and other taxpayers for the performance and cost of their major academic programs and support services. However, school districts we have reviewed generally had not established program-level goals, objectives, and measures, and do not routinely evaluate their overall performance. These activities should be greatly expanded.

School districts can significantly improve their use of resources

School districts can significantly improve their use of resources. Since 1996, independent reviews of 11 school districts serving more than 850,000 students have identified $312,969,052 in potential five-year net cost savings and related fiscal effects in both operational and educational programs. The reviews have identified hundreds of ways to control costs, reduce overhead, streamline operations and improve services. While the type and amount of savings varied by district, the reviews revealed that by changing standard management practices and procedures school districts have the potential to save significant funds. Review findings suggest that other Florida school districts could significantly improve their use of resources by undergoing a similar review.

The Legislature could further improve school district accountability by instituting a mandatory best practice review cycle

To improve school district performance accountability and their use of resources, we **recommend** that the Legislature consider implementing a system of state-funded, mandatory Best Financial Management Practices Reviews that would occur on a cycle. These reviews would be contracted to private consulting firms. Review of all school districts on a 5- to 10-year cycle, using the best practice method should help to improve efficient and effective use of school district resources.

School districts can benefit from prior school district reviews

To increase the usefulness of the school district review process, we **recommend** that the Department of Education work with OPPAGA to identify strategies to disseminate information to school districts on the results of past studies. This information should include commonly identified ways school districts can improve management, increase efficiency and effectiveness, and save funds. Strategies may include training, technical assistance papers, and a web-based database.

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Agency Response

The Commissioner of Education provided a written response to our preliminary and tentative findings and recommendations. (See Appendix F, page 80, for his response.)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Purpose

This report presents the results of OPPAGA's program evaluation and justification review of the Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program (K-12) administered by the 67 district school boards with oversight and technical assistance provided by the Florida Department of Education. The 1994 Government Performance and Accountability Act directs OPPAGA to conduct justification reviews of each program during its second year of operation under a performance-based budget. Justification reviews assess agency performance measures, evaluate program performance, and identify policy alternatives for improving services and reducing costs. Appendix A summarizes our conclusions regarding the nine issue areas the law requires OPPAGA to consider in a justification review. [1]

Background

The purpose of the K-12 Public Education Program is to ensure that each student has an equal opportunity to attain the highest levels of educational achievement, and to assist in preparing students to successfully participate in the workforce and pursue postsecondary education.

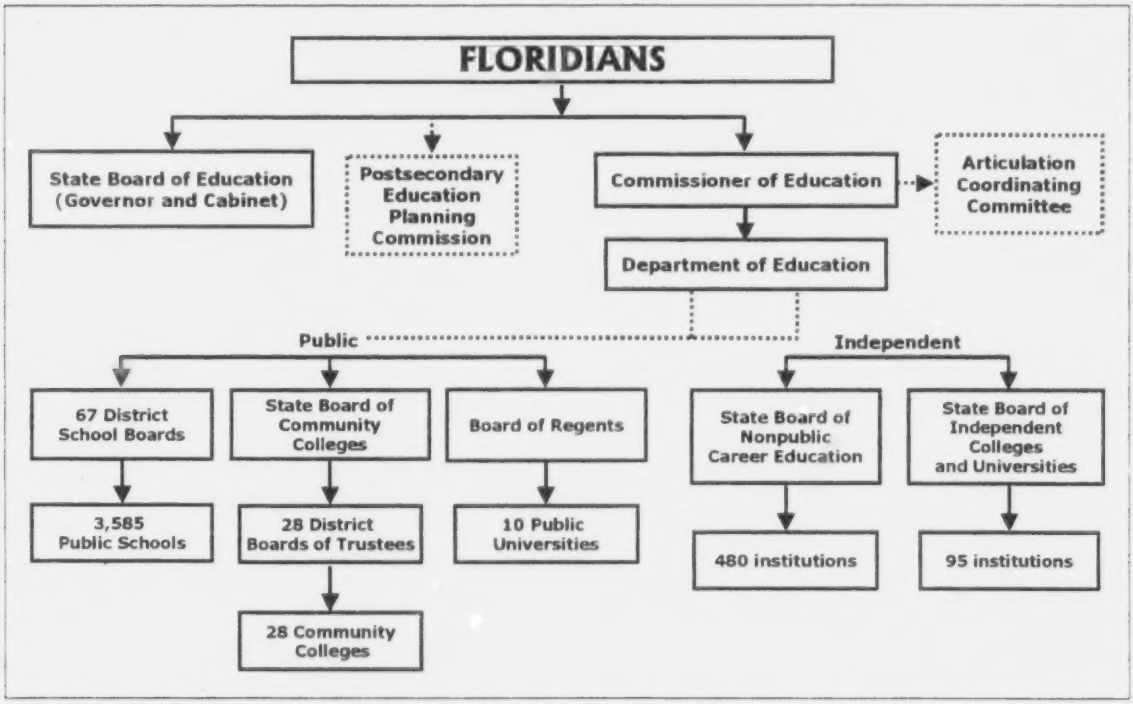
Current governance structure

The state constitution requires Florida's system of public education to be a uniform, safe and high quality system of free public schools and establishes the Governor and the Cabinet as the State Board of Education (see Exhibit 1). Florida law requires that public education be a function and responsibility of the state. As such, the state retains the responsibility for establishing minimum standards and regulations to ensure efficient operation of schools and adequate educational opportunities for all children. The Commissioner of Education is the chief educational officer of the state, the secretary and executive officer of the State Board of Education, and the head of the Department of Education. The Department of Education provides professional leadership, technical assistance, public reports on school performance and support to Florida's

[1] OPPAGA recently published two related evaluations: *Charter Schools Need Improved Academic Accountability and Financial Management*, Report No. 99-48, April 2000, and *Florida On-Line High School Should Improve Its Accountability and Access Processes*, Report No. 00-08, September 2000.

school districts, charter schools, and research schools. The department recommends educational standards to the State Board of Education through the Commissioner of Education and reports the results of Florida's education system to schools, districts, and the public.

Exhibit 1
Current Education Governance Structure

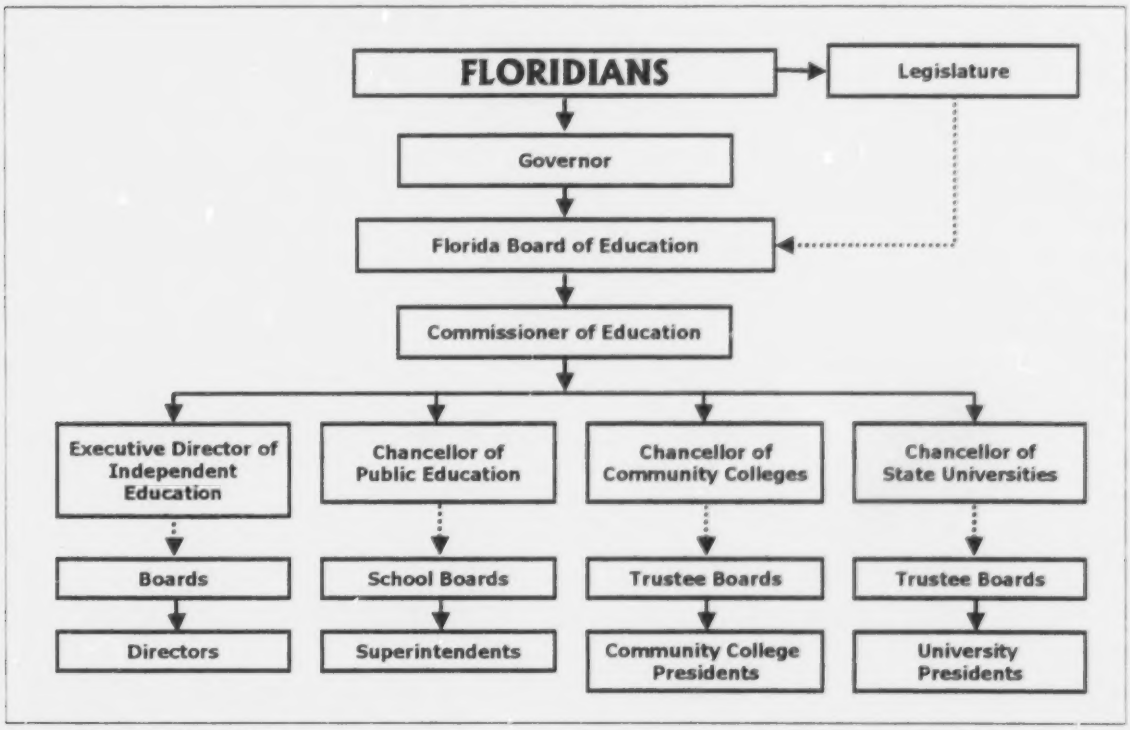


Source: Executive Office of the Governor.

Governance reorganization is being proposed

The state is reorganizing the governance structure to move to a K-20 (kindergarten through graduate school) education system. In 1998, Floridians approved Amendment 8 to the state constitution to (1) create a State Board of Education with seven members appointed by the Governor; (2) remove the function of the State Board of Education from the Cabinet; and (3) require the new State Board of Education to appoint the Commissioner of Education. An appointed 35-member committee (the Commissioner's Blue Ribbon Panel on Education Governance) developed a governance model that became the basis for the Florida Education Governance Reorganization Act of 2000 (Ch. 2000-321, *Laws of Florida*), which also established the Education Governance Reorganization Transition task force. Exhibit 2 shows the education governance structure to be in effect by 2003 subject to revision based on recommendations by the task force.

Exhibit 2
Proposed Education Governance Structure Effective January 2003 as Described by the Florida Education Governance Reorganization Task Force



Source: Executive Office of the Governor.

School districts provide public education

In Florida, each county constitutes a school district (see Exhibit 3). During the 1999-2000 school year, school districts provided public education to approximately 2.4 million kindergarten to twelfth grade students through a system of 67 school districts and about 3,585 schools, including 113 charter schools, and 4 university research schools.[2] Statewide, student membership has grown by 200,895 (9.2%) since 1995.[3] This is the equivalent of adding a school district larger than Broward County or one nearly twice the size of Orange County to Florida's student population in five years' time.

The elected school board in each school district establishes policies and operates, controls, and supervises all of the public schools (including charter schools) in the district. In the 1999-2000 school year, approximately 66% (44 of 67) of school districts have elected

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[2] Charter schools (s. 228.056, *F.S.*) and university developmental research schools (s. 228.053, *F.S.*) operate under governing boards which are independent of the school district, but for which the school district is ultimately responsible as provided by Article IX, Section 4, of the state constitution.

[3] Private schools report 288,248 students attended their 1,645 schools during the 1999-2000 school year.

superintendents with the remaining superintendents appointed by the district's school board. The superintendent, as the executive officer of the school district, is responsible for recommending policies to the school board, administration and management of schools, and for the supervision of instruction.

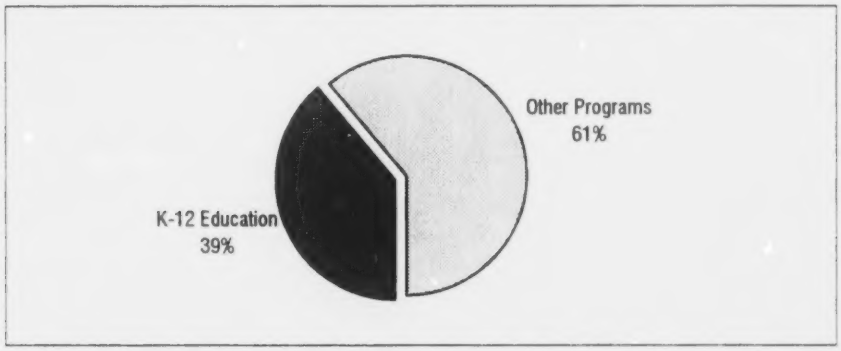
Exhibit 3
Florida's 67 School Districts

Source: Developed by OPPAGA.

Program resources

Funding for K-12 education is a major portion of the state's $51 billion budget.[4] In Fiscal Year 2000-01, the Legislature appropriated 39% of the state's general revenue to K-12 education (see Exhibit 4). General revenue is the portion of the state budget over which the Legislature has the most control.

Exhibit 4
K-12 Education Was Appropriated 39% of General Revenue for 2000-01



Source: Chapter 2000-166, *Laws of Florida*.

Total funding for public schools is increasing

In Fiscal Year 2000-01, total funding for K-12 education in Florida was $15,044,194,350, including federal (8%), state (61%), local (30%), and other contributions (1%). Funding for education comes from a variety of sources. The main sources include sales tax, utility bill taxes, lottery ticket sales, local property taxes, and federal trust funds. As shown in Exhibit 5, total funding for public schools increased 16% since 1998-99. The majority (79%) of these education funds is appropriated to school districts through the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) and categorical funding programs. The remaining 21% is allocated through other means such as contracts and grants and less than 1% remains with the Department of Education.

[4] The Governor's proposal for Fiscal Year 2001-02 marks a new starting point in presenting the state budget. The total proposed budget is $43.2 billion, which is $8.4 billion less than the previous year. However, the total budget reflects a policy change that eliminates double counting of some funds particularly passed through to local governments and inter- or intra-agency transfers that were budgeted twice. The "real" dollars budgeted in the Governor's proposal have not decreased, but increased approximately $1.1 billion.

Exhibit 5
Program Funding Increased 16% Since 1998-1999

Funding Source	Fiscal Year Funding 1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01
General revenue	$ 5,595,293,626	$ 7,219,819,505	$ 7,597,723,683
Local required effort[1]	3,869,201,477	3,840,192,576	4,077,741,028
State trust funds	1,443,113,946	1,066,028,358	1,011,294,408
Lottery trust funds	596,290,000	453,110,000	554,300,000
Federal trust funds	894,967,904	1,109,885,222	1,170,421,794
Local discretionary funds	416,771,185	437,767,465	468,492,514
Projects, contracts, grants	107,849,697	165,171,952	164,220,923
Total Funding	**$12,923,487,835**	**$14,291,975,078**	**$15,044,194,350**

[1] Section 236.081, *F.S.*, provides that each school board participating in the state allocation of funds for current operation of schools must levy the millage set for its required local effort from taxes.

Source: DOE budget documents, general appropriations acts, and legislative conference reports.

Most of the program funds are distributed through FEFP funding

Approximately 70% ($10,541,705,563 of $15,044,194,350) of education funding is provided through the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP). FEFP funding is made up of both state (61%) and local (39%) funds. The FEFP is designed to guarantee each student in Florida's public education system "the availability of programs and services appropriate to his or her educational needs which are substantially equal to those available to any similar student notwithstanding geographic differences and varying local economic factors." The FEFP is a system that allocates state funds by multiplying the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) students in each of the funded educational programs by cost factors to obtain weighted FTEs. Weighted FTEs are then multiplied by a base student allocation and by a district cost differential to determine the base funding.

Other adjustments, such as Supplemental Academic Instruction (SAI) program funds are added to determine total FEFP dollars. The Legislature allows districts to use SAI funds ($527 million in 1999-2000 and $663 million in 2000-01) for such things as a modified curriculum, reading instruction, after school instruction, tutoring, mentoring, class size reduction, extended school year, and intensive skill development in summer school to improve student achievement. [5]

Categorical funding indirectly supports FEFP programs

Approximately 9% ($1,418,210,066 of $15,044,194,350) of education funding is appropriated through categorical and special allocations, which are added to the FEFP allocation to fund programs or activities that indirectly support FEFP programs. The major categorical funding programs provide funds for specific purposes such as school construction

[5] School districts reported their planned use of SAI funds for the 1999-2000 school year to the department. The department found school districts were able to carry through with services, programs, and strategies they had already planned for 1999-2000 and also address the broad statutory mandates of SAI.

and debt service, renovation and maintenance, instructional materials, and student transportation. Special allocations include activities such as teacher recruitment and retention, teacher training, Excellent Teaching Program, and school recognition.

Financial incentives are used to improve student achievement

Florida currently uses financial incentives to encourage high performance in the K-12 public education system, and this use has increased over the years. Florida's School Recognition Program awards and recognizes schools based on criteria linked directly to student achievement. Schools with sustained high student performance and schools that show significant improvement in student performance are eligible for financial awards of up to $100 per student. In 1998, 140 schools received awards, while 319 schools received awards in 1999. In 2000, the department recognized 1,016 schools for being high-performing schools or improving their school performances by awarding $80,707,094. These awards ranged from $8,450 to $322,596. Schools were authorized to use award funds for computer equipment and software, staff incentives, instructional materials and supplies, and specific curriculum programs, such as reading and language arts.

Efforts underway to re-examine funding of public schools

In the past two years the Governor and the Legislature have sought to re-examine the way Florida funds K-12 education to ensure that schools are adequately and equitability funded. These efforts include the creation of task forces to examine the state's education funding system and equity within school districts, and a report on financial assistance to schools.

Florida established tasks forces to re-examine funding allocation and equity

Florida Education Finance Program Task Force. Chapter 2000-181, *Laws of Florida*, created a 15-member Task Force on Public School Funding to re-examine funding under the state system and make recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature by February 1, 2002. The task force held its first organizational meeting in September 2000. The issues to be examined by the task force include funding based on student performance, the relationship of state and local funding, funding equity, technology acquisition and support, funding to support parental choice, and the result of studies by nationally recognized experts in school funding.

Equity in Educational Opportunity Task Force. The Legislature appropriates state funding for K-12 public education to school districts largely based on formulas in the Florida Education Finance Program. School districts then allocate those funds to schools. The state constitution provides that it is a state responsibility to ensure adequate provision for the education of all children residing within the state. There is concern that there is disparity within school districts and that not all children receive an equitable distribution of the state's resources. Executive Order 99-280 established an Equity in Educational Opportunity Task Force to issue a final report by November 2000 that answers to what

extent there is inequity within school districts in terms of financial, intangible support, and low expectations. The Equity Task Force report issued January 31, 2001, includes several recommendations, such as improving data quality, parental involvement, and communication of student achievement goals and objectives.

The Department of Education is improving financial reporting mechanisms

Reporting of financial assistance to schools. The 2000 General Appropriations Act provides that the Department of Education must develop a user-friendly and easy-to-understand reporting mechanism that provides information on resources provided to schools through three reports. The first report, published in October 2000, details financial assistance to schools that in 1999-2000 received A, D, or F grades under the state's school grading formula.[6] The report indicates schools receiving D and F grades spent $960 in elementary schools, $644 in middle school, and $388 in high schools more per student than schools that had received an A grade. The Equity in Educational Opportunity Task Force found similar funding patterns in the school districts they visited. The second report details the assistance and intervention to each D and F school, and the third report details final expenditures for the 1999-2000 school year.

Over half of school district staff are classified as instructional

School districts employed 268,983 full-time staff during the 1999-2000 school year (3% administrative, 55% instructional, and 42% support staff). This is an increase of 5.4% from 1997-98 (see Exhibit 6). Support staff includes custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, etc. In addition to district staff, the Department of Education was authorized 994 staff to administer statewide programs and provide technical assistance to school districts.

Exhibit 6
Full-Time Staff in Florida's School Districts Increased 5.4% Between 1997-98 and 1999-2000

	Fiscal Year		
Staff Positions	**1997-98**	**1998-99**	**1999-2000** [1]
Administrative	8,740	9,112	9,251
Teachers	126,397	129,731	132,554
Other Instruction Staff	13,766	14,593	15,197
Support Staff	106,404	108,889	111,981
Total Full-Time Staff	**255,307**	**262,325**	**268,983**

[1] The most recent year that staff information is available is the 1999-2000 school year.
Source: DOE's school district staff reports.

[6] The report is available on the Internet (http://www.firn.edu/doe/cgi-bin/adf/report.pl).

Chapter 2

Program Benefit, Placement, and Potential for Privatization

The state's Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program (K-12) provides instruction to students in all public schools with the intent to ensure each student has an equal opportunity to attain the highest levels of educational achievement, and to assist in preparing students to successfully participate in the workforce and pursue postsecondary education.

The program is beneficial and should be continued

The Florida Constitution places a high value on the education of the citizens that live within its borders and requires the state to maintain a high quality system of free and public schools. Education is a "public good" in that it benefits all Florida citizens, not just the individuals receiving education. For instance, an educated populace is considered critical to ensuring the health of the state's economy and the welfare of its citizens. Continuing the K-12 Education Program and associated funding will help ensure that members of Florida's populace have the knowledge and skills to support themselves financially.

Minimal duplication exists, but school districts could be more efficient

In general, there is minimal unnecessary duplication within the K-12 education delivery system. For instance, although school districts offer similar or the same programs and support services, they generally only serve students within their respective counties. In addition, while state and local educational entities benefit from cooperation and coordination with other agencies, in general their roles and responsibilities are adequately defined to minimize duplication of efforts. Furthermore, OPPAGA did not identify any benefit to transferring the K-12 Public Education Program's functions and activities from the State Board of Education and 67 school districts to another state agency. The program is appropriately placed with the 67 school districts because this facilitates the state's intent to promote local control and operation.

Collaboration with adjacent school districts provides opportunities for savings

While the state's constitution prohibits school districts from splitting into separate districts, it allows two or more school districts to operate and finance joint educational programs. While no school districts have merged, several districts have benefited from collaborating with adjacent school districts. One example of this type of collaboration is through the use of consortiums. These consortiums provide everything from training opportunities to technical support for school districts across the state. Typically consortiums are organized by geographic region; however, there are some consortiums that are organized around a specific topic or need. For example, the Consortium of Education Foundations is made up of representatives from each county's education foundation.

An illustration of the benefits of collaborative efforts to school districts is evident in Glades County. A 1998 independent review of the Glades County School District in rural south central Florida found that merging or increasing collaboration with surrounding school districts could result in several benefits experienced by larger school districts. The review found that merging or entering into additional agreements with neighboring districts would help the Glades County School District to better serve students by enhancing curriculum offerings and increasing its ability to respond to critical needs in areas such as personnel and technology. The review also found that similar existing agreements between Glades and other districts already saved Glades operating costs. For instance, approximately 330 students in the northern part of the county attended schools in neighboring school districts to save on transportation costs, as these students live closer to schools in adjacent counties than Glades. However, before school districts consolidate, they need to address governance issues and community support for such agreements.

Several opportunities for choice and privatization exist within the system

Although the constitution provides for a system of free and public schools, several opportunities for choice and privatization exist within the current system. Currently, Florida citizens may choose not to participate in the public education system and to pay tuition to send their children to a private school or to home school their children. In addition, alternative education centers and Juvenile Justice Centers have a long history of privatization.

Opportunities for school choice have grown from the choice between paying tuition and sending children to a private school or sending children to the public school for which they are zoned. Many school districts now offer public school choice in which parents have a limited selection of public schools their child can attend, including charter

schools. Districts also have implemented magnet schools, which offer specific programs, for example, performing arts, science and technology, or health-related programs. Parents can apply to send their children to these schools. Further, with passage of the A+ Plan in 1999, the state began to offer "Opportunity Scholarships," or school vouchers, to students who attended a school that has been designated as failing for two years within a four-year period.[7] For more information on public school choice and Opportunity Scholarships, please see Chapter 3, page 14. In addition, 982 children in 38 school districts took advantage of the Scholarship for Children with Disabilities Program. This program allows the parents of children with documented disabilities and who are not making adequate progress to choose which school, public or private, their children attend. The average cost of this program is $6,860 per student.

School districts may benefit from privatizing some services

Privatizing the delivery of selected district services may benefit school districts by saving funds and improving service quality. The services that school districts most commonly privatize are custodial services, food services, and transportation. A 1999 OPPAGA review found that four Florida school districts have privatized all or some of their student transportation services.[8] In addition, the Department of Education reports that four districts have privatized food service. When determining whether to privatize services, school districts must address several issues to fully assess the potential benefits of privatization. For example, privatizing a service should ensure lower and predictable costs while at the same time increasing the level of service provided to students, faculty, and administration. In addition, other factors school districts should consider include whether there is reliable and complete cost data to support a "make" versus "buy" decision, whether there is sufficient commercial activity in the area to promote competition among potential providers, whether quality and performance of private providers can be assessed, and whether controls can be established to maintain accountability for public funds.

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[7] Refer to s. 279.0535, *F.S.* In the school year 2000-01, 51 students in Escambia County attended five private schools on Opportunity Scholarships. For more information on the A+ Plan, please see Chapter 3.

[8] *Progress Report: Review of the Potential for Privatizing Student Transportation*, Report No. 99-18, December 1999. For suggested guidelines, advantages and disadvantages of privatization, see OPPAGA Report No. 98-64, *Assessing Privatization in State Agency Programs*.

Chapter 3

The K-12 Accountability System Is Still Being Refined

Overall, Florida has a strong state-level educational accountability system. Florida's public school accountability system's strengths include student assessment, individual school ratings, rewards, and assistance. Several components under development should further strengthen the system.

Current educational accountability efforts began more than 30 years ago

Florida has a long history of promoting accountability of its K-12 education system. For instance, in 1971, former Governor Askew commissioned a two-year study of Florida's public education system. The study included recommendations to establish fiscal equity, school-based management, short-and long-term planning, and a program of research and development at the state and district levels. The Florida Legislature, based on these recommendations enacted a series of bills, most notably the Educational Accountability Act of 1973. This act required the development of a set of uniform, statewide, basic educational objectives for each grade in each subject and, criterion- and norm-referenced tests. The results of the tests were required to be published publicly along with attitudinal data on teachers, parents, and students. In 1976 Florida created the first unified testing program. The program was implemented in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 and authorized the nation's first required high school graduation test.

Blueprint 2000 localized control and accountability

In 1991, the Florida Legislature enacted the School Improvement and Educational Accountability Act, referred to as Blueprint 2000. Blueprint 2000 established eight education goals and provisions to restore more educational control to local districts, schools, parents, and communities. Virtually all of the requirements of the previous educational reforms and the special categorical funds that accompanied them were abolished by this legislation. Between 1990 and 1993, the Legislature reduced the number of funding programs from 77 distinct categories to only 13. Steps also were taken to encourage innovation and risk-taking in schools, including a system allowing schools to request waivers from statutes and rules.

Florida's current educational accountability system is still being refined

Since 1991 and with the adoption of the 1999 A+ plan the state has further developed and refined the K-12 education accountability system. The current system has the components described below.

- ***Standards.*** In 1996 the State Board of Education adopted the Sunshine State Standards. These are a list of benchmarks by grade level and subject.
- ***Assessments.*** The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), a criterion-referenced test was designed to measure what students know in relationship to the Sunshine State Standards. [9] A performance-based writing assessment, entitled Florida Writes!, in place since 1992, was included as part of the FCAT in 2000. During the 1999-2000 school year the state field-tested an FCAT test without performance tasks in grades 3, 6, 7, and 9. The assessment focused on math and reading. In order to compare the achievement of Florida students to a national norm group of students in grades 3-10, Florida began using the Stanford 9 Achievement Test in 1999-2000.
- ***Measuring school progress based on student achievement.*** In 1999 the A+ Plan changed the existing school grading system from levels 1 - 5 to school performance grades A-F. School performance grades are based on FCAT achievement levels for reading, math, and writing, as well as other performance data such as attendance and suspensions. See Appendix C for more information relating to school grading.
- ***Performance-Based Budgeting Measures.*** The performance-based budgeting (PB^2) measures for Fiscal Year 1999-2000 were the
  - number and percentage of teachers with National Teachers Certification, reported by the district;
  - number and percentage of A schools, reported by the district; and
  - number and percentage of D or F schools, reported by the district

  In addition, the Legislature directed the department to establish the following measures for Fiscal Year 2000-01:
  - number and percentage of schools declining one or more letter grades, reported by the district, and
  - number and percentage of schools improving one or more letter grades, reported by the district.

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[9] A criterion-referenced test is an assessment used to determine what a student knows based on certain criteria. In this case, the criteria are the Sunshine State Standards, which were developed with broad stakeholder input.

For more information on performance-based budgeting measures, see page 22. [10]

- ***Opportunity Scholarships.*** Under the A+ plan, students enrolled in a school designated as failing for two years within a four-year period are given the opportunity to transfer to a higher-performing public school or with a voucher to a participating private school. In the school year 2000-01, 51 students in Escambia County attended five private schools on Opportunity Scholarships. Eighty-five students, also from Escambia County, attended higher performing public schools under the Opportunity Scholarship Program.
- ***Scholarship for Children With Disabilities Program.*** Parents of students with documented disabilities and who are not making adequate progress are allowed to choose between public and private schools for their children. The average cost of this program is $6,860 per student. In 2000, 982 children in 38 school districts took advantage of this program.
- ***The School Recognition Program.*** Through Florida's School Recognition Program, the Department of Education provides financial awards and recognition to schools that sustain high performance and to schools that show significant improvement in student performance. In 1998, 140 schools received the award. In 1999, 319 schools received the award. In 2000, 1,016 schools were recognized by the department, 8% for sustaining high performance and 92% for improving school performance during the 1999-2000 school year.
- ***Financial and Management Reviews.*** School districts can request and the Legislature appropriate funds in order to undergo a Best Financial Management Practices Review or a School District Performance Review. For more information on these types of reviews, see Chapter 6 and 7.

Key aspects of Florida's accountability system are still being implemented

When the A+ plan was developed, parts of the plan were designed to be implemented immediately, and other sections were to be implemented over time. The sections that are in the process of being developed and implemented are the value-added assessment component, expanding the subjects assessed in the FCAT to include science, performance pay policies linked to student performance, and calculating student membership count using an average daily attendance calculation.

- ***Value-Added Assessment.*** The A+ Plan called for a value-added assessment system to determine the state's progress toward mastery of the Sunshine State Standards. In previous years, students were not tested from one grade to the next; therefore, test scores of different groups of students were compared to estimate the state's academic

[10] Not all of the state's 3,585 public schools receive school performance grades. Typically, schools with fewer than 30 students in the eligible pool are not graded. Schools with no grade configurations for the grade levels being tested are not graded. Alternative and juvenile justice programs and brand new schools are exempt.

gains. For instance, FCAT scores of fourth graders tested in 1998-99 were compared to the scores of students in fourth grade in 1999-2000 to determine school performance and school grades. This process compares the test scores of two different groups of students rather than directly tracking the same students over time to determine what they learned. Value-added assessment, scheduled to be in place in the 2001-02 school year, will eliminate this issue by testing students each year in grades 3-10 and comparing their FCAT scores to the scores they received the previous year. The Legislature also directed that value-added results be used to make conclusions on the effectiveness of teachers, schools, and districts.

- ***Standards Assessed.*** Currently reading, writing, and math are included on the FCAT. Science is scheduled to be included in the FCAT for grades 4, 8, and 10 beginning in 2003.
- ***Increased Achievement Levels.*** According to State Board of Education Rules, the current FCAT achievement levels are valid through December 31, 2001, and will be raised beginning on January 1, 2002. [11] There are five designated achievement levels for each FCAT test. Cut-off scores have been set for each area tested by the FCAT. This is the major component used to determine the school performance grade.
- ***High School Graduation Standards.*** According to State Board of Education Rule, beginning in the 2002-03 school year the tenth-grade FCAT reading and mathematics assessments will be used as a graduation requirement, replacing the High School Competency Test (HSCT). [12] As with the HSCT, students who do not pass the FCAT in tenth grade will be permitted several opportunities for remediation and to retake the FCAT before their scheduled graduation date at the end of twelfth grade. This change could have a significant effect on the high school graduation rate depending on the score needed to graduate and remediation provided to students who fail to initially pass the test. Therefore, when implementing this change the potential effect on graduation rate needs to be considered. [13]
- ***Performance Pay.*** By June 30, 2002, or beginning with the full implementation of an annual assessment of learning gains, whichever occurs later, the school board must adopt a budget that includes a reserve to fully fund an additional 5% supplement for school administrators and instructional personnel. Employees who demonstrate outstanding performance must be allowed to earn a 5% supplement in addition to their individual, negotiated salary.

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[11] Rule 6A-1.09422(5)(b), Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test Requirements, *Florida Administrative Code*.

[12] Rule 6A-1.09981(1)(b)5., Implementation of Florida's System of School Improvement and Accountability, *Florida Administrative Code*.

[13] For example, in 1999-2000 only 32% of high school students demonstrated at least partial success (achievement levels 3 and above) on FCAT in reading. See Exhibit 14, page 28.

The supplements will be funded from the reserve funds adopted in the salary schedule.

- ***Average Daily Attendance.*** Currently district school attendance is tracked by four membership surveys (commonly referred to as "count weeks"). This process can lead to inflated attendance data. Using average daily attendance to determine enrollment instead of count weeks will provide a more accurate tool in determining actual student attendance in schools. This change can provide an incentive for schools to get students to come to school throughout the year. When implemented, average daily attendance will be one portion of the formula used to calculate the school performance grade and enrollment for determining FEFP calculations. For more information on the calculation of school grades, please see Appendix C.

Florida's accountability system compares favorably to those in other states

Overall, Florida has a relatively strong educational accountability system in comparison to those systems in other states. Florida's public school accountability system is strong because it has standards for most subject areas, it assesses reading, writing, math, and has an accountability system for schools. According to *Education Week*, Florida's accountability system in place during the 1999-2000 school year received an overall grade of B. [14] *Education Week* assessed state accountability systems using three factors.

- ***Standards (40% of score).*** States that have adopted standards in the four core subjects—English, mathematics, science, and social studies—earned higher marks. *Education Week* considered Florida's standards as acceptable. Florida met 12 of the 13 criteria used to evaluate the quality of each state's standards.
- ***Assessments (30% of score).*** States that incorporate multiple- choice tests, performance tasks, and portfolios in their assessment programs earned the best rating. States that measure student achievement against standards in all four core subjects earned an A. States that plan to participate in the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also were considered to have a better accountability system than those who did not. Florida met 15 of the 28 criteria used to evaluate the state's assessment system. However, *Education Week* found that Florida's assessment system could be improved by developing assessments for history/social studies and science, implementing extended response items to more subject areas, as well as by using portfolio assessment as one component of the state assessment system. Portfolio assessments are a more subjective and time-consuming form of assessment, and it is for that reason the state

[14] See *Education Week*, Vol. XX, No. 17, January 11, 2001.

does not require portfolio assessments as part of the required state assessment system.

- ***Accountability (30% of score).*** States earned higher marks for each component of a school accountability system that is in place (report cards, ratings, rewards, assistance, and school wide sanctions). Although Florida has established consequences for poor school performance, it only received high marks in 4 of the 5 accountability areas because it does not impose sanctions such as state takeover of schools and the removal of staff for poor performance.

Florida's accountability system ranked fifteenth in the nation

Overall, *Education Week* ranked Florida's accountability system fifteenth in the nation. Among larger states, Florida received higher scores than Pennsylvania and Illinois. In addition, Florida's accountability system ranked in the middle among southern states. See Exhibit 7 for more information on how Florida's accountability system compared to those of other states.

Exhibit 7
Florida's Accountability System Generally Scores Well

State		Grade	Score
Large States	New York	A	94
	Michigan	B	86
	California	B	85
	Florida	**B**	**84**
	Texas	B	84
	Illinois	B-	80
	Pennsylvania	D	63
Southern States	Kentucky	A-	91
	North Carolina	B+	87
	South Carolina	B+	87
	Virginia	B	86
	Louisiana	B	85
	Florida	**B**	**84**
	Alabama	C+	78
	Georgia	C+	79
	West Virginia	D+	69
	Mississippi	D-	62
	Tennessee	F	59

Source: *Education Week,* Vol. XX, No. 17, January 11,2001.

Florida's reforms are consistent with those in other states

Florida's education accountability reforms are similar to those recently enacted by other states. According to an October 2000 report issued by the National Conference of State Legislatures, during the 1997 through 2000 legislative sessions, more than half the states enacted new policies that address accountability and assessment. In general, these policies focus on student assessment, rating schools, and teacher quality. See Exhibit 8 for more information on the education accountability reforms other states have enacted.

Exhibit 8
Florida's Education Accountability Reforms Are Similar to Those Recently Enacted By Other States

State	Policy
Alabama	Classifies schools each year based on student performance on the statewide achievement tests. Schools that are placed on Academic Alert—if a majority of students score below the 23rd percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test—are required to achieve specified improvement. If progress is not made in a year, the schools are assigned an academic improvement team of professionals who are appointed by the state Superintendent of Education.
California	Enacted the Public Schools Accountability Act, which mandates that schools are publicly ranked using the academic performance index (API). The API is a complex formula that is based on statewide test scores for the first three to five years (starting in January 2000) and eventually will include high school graduation rates, dropout rates, and school attendance rates. The superintendent of public instruction develops an expected annual percentage growth target for schools based on their API baseline scores.
Colorado	Senate Bill 186 mandates the Department of Education to evaluate the academic performance and safety of every public school within the state. The bill also requires the department to develop a comprehensive data collection and reporting system for evaluation.
Delaware	Passed the Educator Accountability Act of 2000, which requires student performance indicators to be used in teacher evaluations that will include student performance and improvement based on the Delaware Student Testing Program in reading, writing, and math.
Connecticut	Requires the State Board of Education to prepare a list of elementary and middle schools, by school district, that are in need of improvement based on student performance on the statewide examination. Each local board of education on the list must meet with the Commissioner of Education to discuss the process of improving school performance. The state publishes a report card on each school, including its performance on the statewide test.
Georgia	A-plus Education Reform Act, passed in 2000, eliminates tenure for beginning teachers, grades schools from A to F based on student performance on statewide assessments, and implements a system of rewards and sanctions for schools. The A-plus act also includes salary increases for teachers in determined shortage areas (e.g., mathematics, science, foreign languages, special education, etc.).
Hawaii	Requires the director of education to establish a comprehensive accountability system, including a student assessment program and a school profile that reports on student performance measures, school attendance, dropout rates, and parental involvement for each school.
Mississippi	Authorized student assessment standards for student promotion and graduation in the public schools, defined standards for the implementation of a performance-based accreditation system for individual schools and school districts, and authorized the State Board of Education to enter into long-term contracts for student assessment.
New Mexico	Identifies schools that qualify for intervention, using multiple indicators of performance and accreditation standards, which include adequacy of performance in required subject matter, adequacy of pupil activities, adequacy of professional development, and adequacy of writing curriculum. The state team identifies schools that qualify for intervention and makes recommendations to the state's Educational Standards Commission. The commission then assigns a liaison to work with the school and identify resources.
Texas	Designed assessment instruments to assess students' essential knowledge and skills in certain grade levels and requires the Texas Education Agency to adopt secondary exit-level assessments to be administered to students in grade 11. Schools and districts can receive cash awards for exemplary student performance, but are subject to intervention and, ultimately, takeover if achievement falls below minimum standards.
Utah	Enacted legislation in 1999 that provides for annual criterion-referenced achievement testing of students in all grade levels and norm-referenced testing of students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10. The State Board of Education is required to develop assessment mechanisms for determining demonstrated competency in courses required for high school graduation and provides for an external evaluation of core curriculum, content standards, objectives and assessments.

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures *State Legislative Report*, "Education Standards, Assessment and Accountability" Volume 25, Number 9, October 2000.

Additional measures need to be developed and performance standards need to be established

Florida's accountability system could be strengthened

Florida's education accountability system is relatively strong compared to those in other states. However, it could be improved by expanding the system to assess the performance of those education programs that receive large sums of state funding, but are currently held less accountable than general education programs. In addition, the state accountability system could be strengthened by developing measures for vocational education, fiscal efficiency, and school readiness and articulation.

- ***Exceptional Student Education and Limited English Proficiency Measures.*** Currently, the scores of many exceptional education students (ESE) and students with limited English proficiency who are enrolled in their first two years of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses are not counted when school grades are determined.[15] In some cases where there are high proportions of ESE and ESOL students (e.g., 30% ESE, 30% ESOL), once the test scores of these students are removed from the school grade formula only a small percentage (40%) of standard curriculum students determine the school grade. Measures need to be developed that are both appropriate and measurable for these two student populations to hold schools accountable. Furthermore, this data can be used toward the school's performance grade when appropriate.
- ***Vocational Education Measures.*** There are currently no measures used for performance-based program budgeting or to calculate school grades that indicate the success of vocational programs offered by school districts. Substantial funds are expended in K-12 vocational programs, particularly at the high school level, with limited performance accountability information readily available to policymakers. The department does collect information on graduation, program completion, employment, and earnings attained for secondary completers.
- ***Fiscal Efficiency Measures.*** The state accountability system does not include fiscal efficiency measures for districts and schools, but focuses on student achievement. While districts are required to complete numerous financial reports, this financial information could be further analyzed and used to develop cost-efficiency measures. By creating cost-efficiency measures, the accountability system would provide a more complete picture of each school district. Requiring each school district to undergo a Best Financial Management Practices Review

[15] The department reports that the annual state contribution to the ESE program is $2,802,928,193 for the 2000-01 school year. According to the department's annual ESOL report, the ESOL program had a total program cost of $508,180,038 for the 1998-99 school year.

could also serve to hold districts accountable for efficient use of resources.

- ***Articulation/Readiness (for the next level) Measures.*** Although measures of kindergarten readiness currently exist, these measures are not used as part of the performance-based program budgeting system or school grading system because schools have very little control over kindergarten students' level of readiness and because the assessment instruments used differ from school district to school district. Beginning in the fall of 2001, all kindergarten students will be assessed using consistent assessment instruments. [16] Currently, there are also no performance-based program budgeting measures, or measures as part of the school performance grade, determining individual students' level of readiness between school levels. Many school personnel we interviewed stated that students arrived at their school behind grade level. For example, students arrived in kindergarten academically behind, started middle school behind, and progressed to high school behind. This is also a common issue discussed by community colleges and universities. By establishing measures at these transition points, (elementary to middle, and middle to high) schools will know exactly what level each student is performing on and will be better able to assist that student achieve academic success. This articulation between grade levels will become increasingly important as Florida moves to a seamless K-20 educational system.
- ***Value-Added Assessments.*** Florida law requires OPPAGA to serve as a consultant to the committee developing the system that will track learning gains for students from year to year. Serving in this capacity, OPPAGA staff have made two observations.
  - At the teacher level, FCAT assessments exist for only math and language arts/reading and can only be applied to teachers of those subjects. Therefore, districts will need to develop other mechanisms to include student performance in the evaluation of teachers who teach other subject areas such as music, social studies, and foreign languages.
  - Many experts, including those who created value-added assessment systems, have cautioned that it should serve as one aspect within a teacher's overall performance assessment and should not be used as the sole determination of teaching ability.

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[16] The 1999 Legislature enacted the School Readiness Act. The act creates the Florida Partnership for School Readiness, which is responsible for adopting and maintaining coordinated policies and standards for programs that prepare young children for kindergarten. The act requires OPPAGA to conduct an assessment of school readiness outcomes by January 2002.

Conclusions and recommendations

Florida's education accountability system is in a state of change but shows promise. Many of the components of the current system were enacted in 1999 as part of the A+ Plan. Other components are in the process of being implemented. The A+ Plan does a reasonably good job of holding schools accountable. The state's educational accountability system could be further strengthened by holding districts more accountable for student performance. In addition, the state accountability system lacks meaningful measures in five areas.

- Exceptional Student Education
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (for the first two years students are in this program)
- Vocational Education
- Fiscal Efficiency (district level)
- Articulation/Readiness between school levels

We recommend that the Department of Education work with the Legislature and the Education Governance Reorganization Transition Task Force to identify and implement measures for major program areas not included in Florida's current accountability system. In addition, to increase fiscal accountability, we recommend that the Legislature consider revising current law to extend Best Financial Management Practices Reviews to all school districts on a scheduled basis (for more information on this recommendation, see Chapter 7 of this report).

Chapter 4

School Grades Improve; Other Areas Need Strengthening

Florida school performance grades have improved significantly in the past two years. Most notably, a large number of elementary schools improved, as did schools that formerly received a grade of F. Statewide writing and math scores have increased, while reading scores showed relatively small gains. Elementary schools also showed gains in reading, but secondary schools' progress remained relatively constant during this period. These performance gains are very positive, but need to be interpreted with some caution until the accountability system implements planned improvements that will calculate individual student learning gains. However, some student performance problems, most notably those relating to low student performance on national tests, a low graduation rate, and high remediation needs of graduates who enter community colleges, indicate much work remains to maximize student performance.

The department's inspector general has developed a monitoring plan to assess K-12 performance data integrity, but has not yet implemented the plan. The plan, when implemented, will provide important safeguards for the school accountability system, but it should be modified to be more risked-based and include more detail about the data elements to be examined and what tests will be conducted. The inspector general has performed other duties related to K-12 education such as investigating allegations of improprieties on FCAT tests and evaluating low test results on the norm-referenced portion of the FCAT reading comprehension test for ninth and tenth graders.

Background

As discussed in Chapter 3, Florida's K-12 accountability system includes many indicators of program performance. Measures of program success such as the performance-based program budgeting measures approved by the Legislature including school grades, and FCAT test scores are among the most important. Other important indicators of program performance include high school graduation and dropout rates and remediation rates in math, reading, and writing for college-level course work. The following sections describe program performance using these key performance indicators.

School performance grades indicate significant improvement, but need to be interpreted with caution

As shown in Exhibit 9, overall performance of the Florida public school system in 1999-2000 already exceeds the standards set by the Legislature for the 2000-01 school year.[17] The measures include school performance grades, which factor FCAT reading, math, and writing test scores into a single index of school-level performance.

Exhibit 9
Program Performance Already Exceeds Standards Established by the Legislature

K-12 Outcome Measures	Performance by School Year 1998-99		1999-00		Standard for 2000-01[1]	
Number and percentage of						
Schools graded "A"	202	8%	577	24%	254	10%
Schools graded "D" or "F"	662	28%	397	17%	494	20%
Schools improving one or more letter grades[1]			932	39%	Standard not yet set	
Schools declining one or more letter grades[1]			234	10%	Standard not yet set	
Teachers with National Teacher's Certification[2]	22	0.02%	568	0.4%	1,046	0.8%

[1] School grades were not calculated for the 1997-98 school year, thus schools improving or decline one or more letter grades could not be determined for 1998-99. For the 1999-2000 school year, school grade standards had not been established for performance-based program budgeting by the Florida Legislature.

[2] The entire assessment process takes place over the better part of a school year. Performance reported during fall 2000 (1,268) exceeds the standard set for the 2000-01 school year.

Source: Chapter 2000-171, *Laws of Florida;* OPPAGA's analysis of DOE's School Accountability Reports; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards report; and DOE's school staff report.

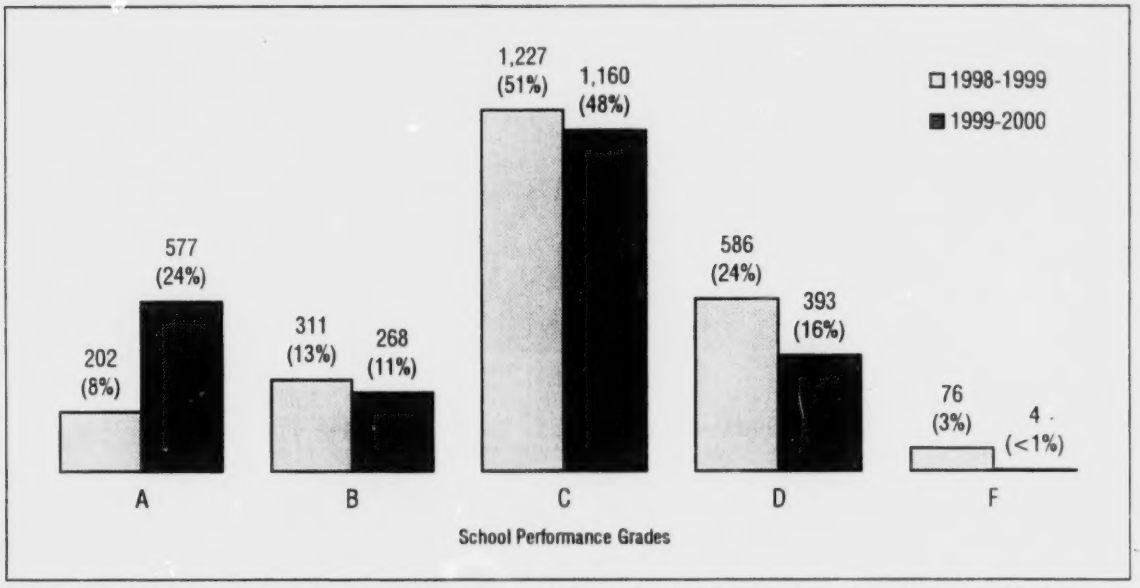
The number of schools graded A more than doubled since 1998-99

Statewide, school performance grades have improved substantially since the 1998-99 school year.[18] The largest increase was in the number of schools receiving an A grade. As shown in Exhibit 10, the total number of schools receiving an A increased from 202 in 1998-99 to 577 in 1999-2000. During the same period, the number of schools receiving a D or F decreased from 662 to 397, a 40% drop. From 1998-99 to 1999-2000, the total number of schools receiving B and C grades remained relatively constant.

[17] At the time the Legislature set the performance standards for K-12 for the 2000-01 school year, it did not have access to 1999-2000 performance information.

[18] OPPAGA analyzed data for 2,402 schools that received grades in both 1998-99 and 1999-2000 and reflect changes due to grade appeals.

Exhibit 10
School Performance Grades Substantially Improved Since 1998-99[1]



[1] Includes only schools receiving performance grades in both the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 school years. For instance, two schools graded F in 1998-99 were closed and not included in the above analysis.

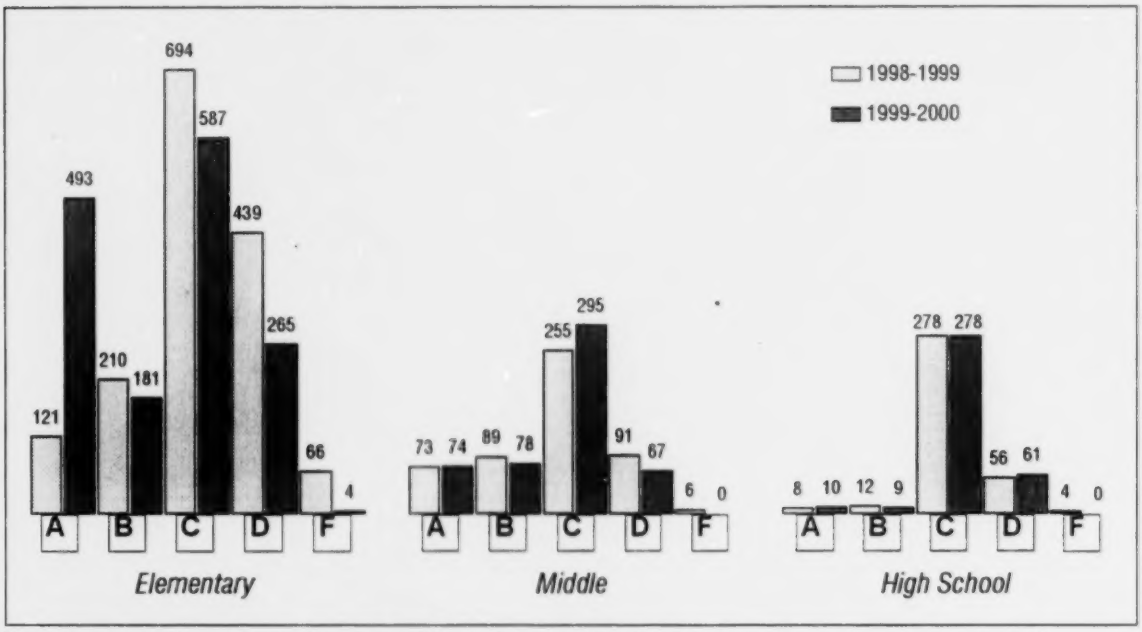
Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE's School Accountability Report.

Elementary school performance grades improved the most

Elementary school grades improved the most during the two-year period. As shown in Exhibit 11 on page 25, the number of elementary schools receiving A grades quadrupled from 121 to 493 while the total number of secondary schools receiving A grades remained relatively constant. Further, the number of elementary schools receiving D and F grades decreased 47% (elementary school D grades decreased from 439 to 265 and F grades decreased from 66 to 4). The number of middle schools receiving D and F grades decreased 31% (middle school D grades decreased from 91 to 67 and F grades decreased from 6 to 0). During this same period, the number of high schools receiving D and F grades remained relatively constant (see page 30 for information regarding factors that should be considered when interpreting program performance).

Student grade-level performance may help explain differences in school performance. For example, if students perform below grade level in elementary school, they are more likely than older students to overcome skill deficits and show improvement if diagnosed and provided adequate instruction. However, if students continue to fall behind, they are less likely to catch up to their grade level in middle and high schools. Therefore, it is critical to identify deficiencies early and take actions to improve student performance.

Exhibit 11
Elementary Schools Are the Most Improved Since 1998-99[1]



[1] Includes only schools receiving performance grades in both the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 school years. For instance, two schools graded F in 1998-99 were closed and not included in the above analysis.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE's School Accountability Report.

Thirty-nine percent of schools' performance grades improved

Approximately one-half (49%) of school grades changed between 1998-99 and 1999-2000. As shown in Exhibit 12, 39% of schools increased their grades compared to 10% of schools that decreased one or more grades, indicating that four schools improved for every school that received a lower grade. Just over one-half (51%) of school's performance grades remained the same. Gains among elementary schools outstripped those of middle and high schools with 51% of elementary schools (777 of 1,530) improving one or more grades. In contrast, 24% (121 of 514) of middle schools and 9% (34 of 358) of high schools increased one or more grades.

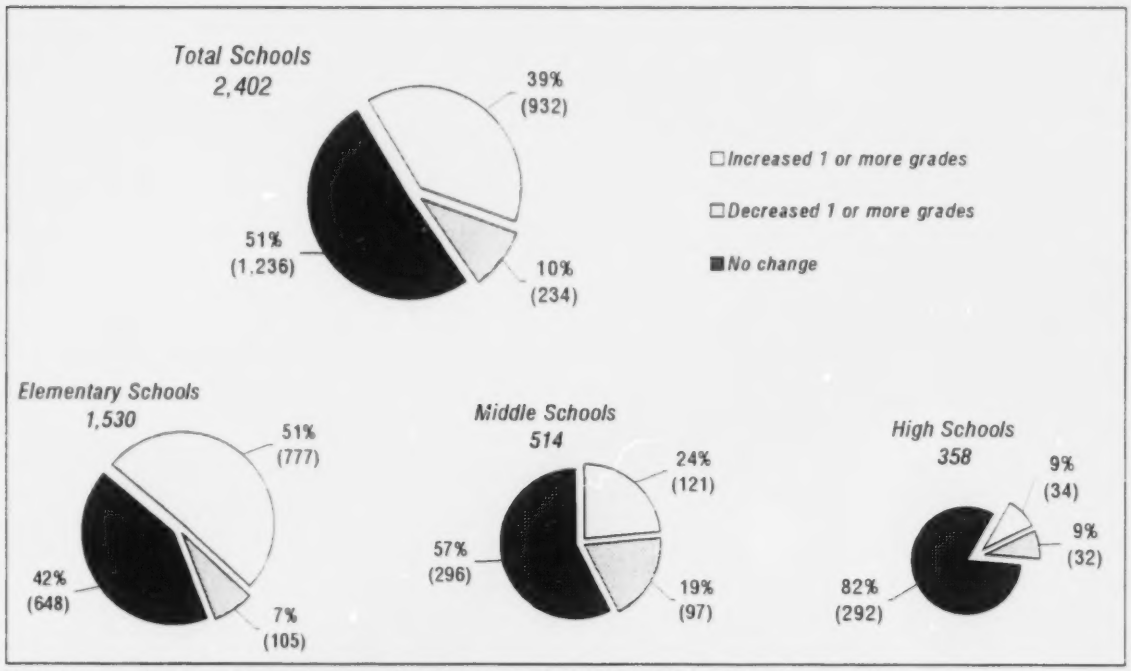
The number of schools graded F decreased substantially

All 76 schools that received an F grade in 1998-99 improved by at least one letter grade in 1999-2000.[19] While 55 schools (72%) increased to a D, 19 schools (25%) improved to a C. The most dramatic improvements were made by two elementary schools—Brentwood Elementary in Escambia County and Fessenden Elementary in Marion County—both of which moved from grades of F to A by increasing the percentage of students meeting performance criteria in reading, math, and writing. However, four elementary schools that received a D in 1998-99 dropped to an F in

[19] Two additional elementary schools had received F grades in 1998-99 for a total of 78, but were subsequently closed. These two schools were not included in the above analysis.

1999-2000, because three schools' performance in writing and one school's performance in math dropped below the minimum performance criteria, placing them below the minimum performance criteria in all three subjects.

Exhibit 12
Almost 40% of Schools Increased One or More Grades in 1999-2000[1]



[1] Includes only schools receiving performance grades in both the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 school years. For instance, two schools graded F in 1998-99 were closed and not included in the above analysis.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE's School Accountability Report.

Performance on math and writing tests most improved, while reading scores remained relatively constant

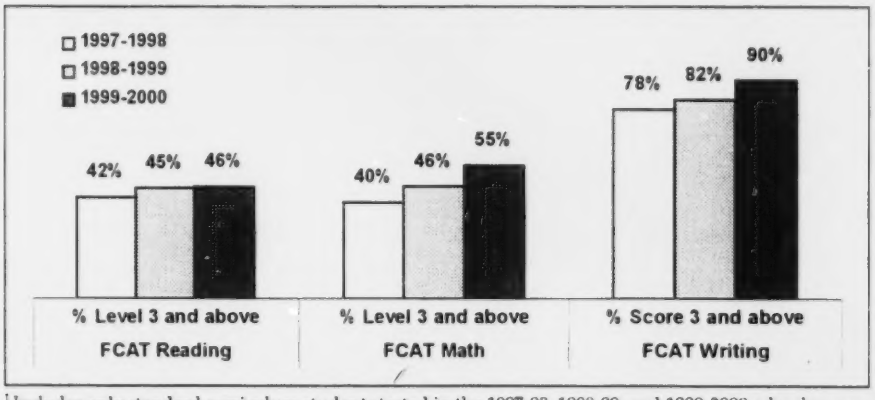
Statewide, student FCAT test scores improved mostly in math and writing, while reading scores remained relatively constant. OPPAGA examined student performance on reading and math portions of the FCAT tests according to five achievement levels. See Appendix C for more information on achievement levels.

- Level 5 performance indicates success, even with the most challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards.
- Level 4 performance indicates success with most questions, but only some success with the most challenging questions.

- Level 3 performance indicates partial success, but inconsistent performance (answers many questions correctly, but is generally less successful with the most challenging questions).
- Level 2 performance indicates limited success.
- Level 1 performance indicates little success.

Students' performance on the FCAT writing test was also examined according to achievement levels defined by student's raw score, ranging from 6.0 to 1.0 with 6.0 being the highest performance. As shown in Exhibit 13, the percentage of students who have achieved level 3 and above performance increased 15 percentage points in math and 12 percentage points in writing. In contrast, students achieving level 3 and above performance related to reading increased only 4 percentage points from 1997-98 to 1999-2000. Despite improvements in FCAT test scores in level 3 and above, a substantial percentage of students are still having limited to little success on FCAT (i.e., levels 1 and 2) in reading (54%) and math (45%). The percentage of students falling into the lowest performance levels in writing was only 10%.

Exhibit13
Percentage of Students With at Least Partial Success on State Tests Increased Significantly in Math and Writing, But Remained Relatively Constant in Reading[1]



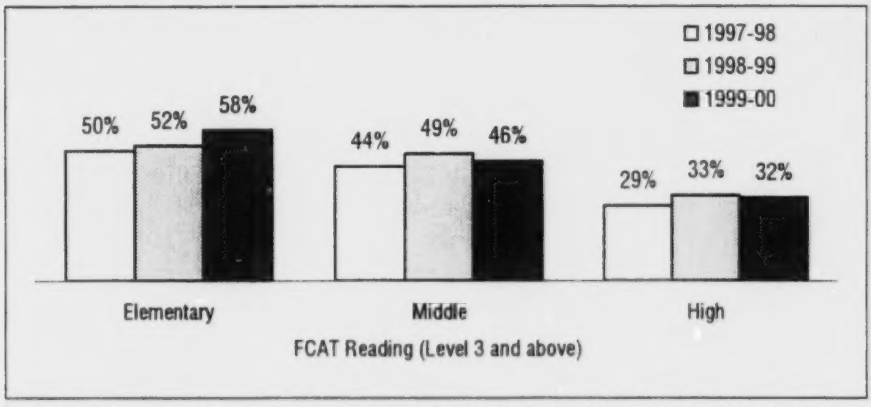
[1] Includes only standard curriculum students tested in the 1997-98, 1998-99, and 1999-2000 school years.
Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE's Disaggregated Achievement Report.

Reading scores improved the most in elementary schools

In addition, while there has been consistent improvement in math and writing across all school levels, improvements in reading test scores vary across elementary, middle, and high schools. As shown in Exhibit 14, from 1997-98 to 1999-2000, the percentage of students scoring at level 3 and above in reading has increased each year among elementary schools and 8 percentage points over the three-year period. However, during the same period, reading scores increased and then remained relatively constant among secondary schools (see page 30 for information regarding

factors that should be considered when interpreting program performance).

Exhibit 14
Percentage of Students Performing at Level 3 and Above in Reading Increased and Then Leveled Off in Secondary Schools[1]



[1] Includes only standard curriculum students tested in the 1997-98, 1998-99, and 1999-2000 school years.
Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE's School Accountability Report.

Substantial achievement gaps continue between student groups, although the gaps are narrowing

A closer examination also shows the percentage of students scoring at the lowest achievement level (achievement level 1) in reading and math has decreased across all subgroups.[20] However, the gap between Black and Hispanic student achievement and other student achievement at the lowest level remains wide at all school levels. Encouragingly, both Black and Hispanic students have made progress in narrowing the gap between them and other students at all school levels in math and in reading at the elementary school level. However, the achievement gap in reading performance remained relatively constant among secondary school students.

Schools receiving an F grade in 1998-99 made gains in reading, math, and writing

All schools that received a grade of F in 1998-99 increased their grades by improving test scores to meet the state's minimum performance criteria in at least one academic area. For instance, all 76 schools receiving an F in 1998-99 increased writing scores sufficient to meet minimum state requirements. In addition to improvements in writing, OPPAGA found that 55% (42 of 76) of these schools also made sufficient improvements in math scores to meet minimum state requirements for a higher grade, and 30% (23 of 76) made sufficient improvements in reading to be removed from the F list. These conclusions are consistent with findings presented

[20] The Department of Education classifies student subgroups as White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian.

in a study conducted by the Center for Civic Innovation released in February 2001. [21]

The cutoff scores that define achievement levels will increase in the 2001-02 school year. Therefore, while test scores from the most recent year improved, schools will need to continue to increase student performance on the FCAT to avoid state results dropping when the cutoff scores are increased. See Appendix C for reading and math scores for each achievement level and for each step.

Performance is mixed on other important indicators

Gains achieved on FCAT scores, student attendance, and the number of nationally certified teachers

Florida's performance on other important educational indicators is mixed. Positive changes are discussed below.

- The 1998-99 FCAT math and writing tests improved for students in exceptional student education (ESE) programs. Specific learning-disabled students' (i.e., the largest group of ESE students and not counted in school performance grades) test score trends on FCAT closely mirror those of the standard curriculum students, although at a much lower level of performance. For example, the percentage of elementary students with specific learning disabilities scoring at 3 and above in writing increased from 25% in 1998-99 to 43% in 1999-2000.
- Student attendance has also improved with absences greater than 21 days, dropping approximately three percentage points between 1996-97 and 1999-2000 at elementary and high schools and declining four percentage points at middle schools.
- Florida had the second highest number of national board certified teachers in the nation during 2000-2001 at 1,268, up 123% from 1999-2000.

Florida's student performance on national tests, graduation rates, and need for remediation remain troubling

However, Florida's students did not perform as well on other program performance indicators.

- Florida students perform below the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests. For instance, the national average reading score for the fourth grade in 1998 was 215 (ranging from 178 to 232) compared to Florida's 207.
- The United States Census Bureau reports that Florida's graduation rate for the population ages 25 and over is 35th in the nation at approximately 83%. Florida's four-year graduation rate is 62% (i.e., within four years after the first time in the ninth grade) with nearly 15% of the adjusted cohort having dropped out of school. A national comparison to Florida's four-year graduation rate was not readily available.

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[21] Refer to *An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program*, available at the following Internet address: http://www.manhattan-institute.org/

- Thirty-seven percent of Florida's high school graduates who went on to a Florida community college or state university in 1999-2000 required remediation in reading, math, or writing. [22] The most recent national survey by the United States Department of Education found, on average, 29% of first-time freshman enrolled in at least one remedial reading, math, or writing course in fall 1995.

Several factors suggest changes in program performance should be interpreted with caution

While the improvements in school grades under the A+ plan are highly encouraging, they need to be interpreted with some caution. There are many complex and interrelated factors that explain student performance. For example, the Equity in Educational Opportunity Task Force identified 17 factors that influence student achievement and recommended that the Legislature use them as a guide for policy development and decision making. Without more data over time and individual student learning gains being measured, it is not possible to separate out actual individual student performance gains from other factors that may account for changes in performance. In consultation with the Department of Education, OPPAGA identified several non-academic and academic factors that may have had an effect on student performance and school grades, including testing different students each year, changes in the grading system, changes in the tests administered, shifts in student populations, and the nature of the skills tested. Limited data was available at the time of this review to fully determine the extent to which each of these factors actually affected student performance and school grades.

Using cross-sectional rather than cohort analysis may affect school performance results

One factor that limits annual measurement of school performance grades is that different students are tested each year. For example, Florida compared students who took the fourth grade reading FCAT test during 1999-2000 to students who took the test in fourth grade in 1998-99. While the test results can show overall performance improvements, it is possible that, for example, the reading skills of the two classes of students may be inherently different (one class may be better readers than the class before); thus, drawing conclusions about program performance based on a comparison of different students from one reporting period to the next may be due to improved teaching practices, differences in the skills between the two classes tested, or a combination of both. When Florida's accountability system is fully implemented, this issue should be alleviated because individual student learning gains will be calculated.

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[22] Of the Florida high school graduates entering Florida community colleges, 59% require remediation in reading, math, or writing in order to be ready for college level course work, compared to 7% of Florida high school graduates attending a Florida university.

Changes in the formula used to calculate school grades affects school performance grades

Changes to the school grading criteria from one year to the next can also affect school performance grades. Changes to a developing measurement system are expected. In 2000, the Florida State Board of Education changed the formula used to calculate school grades for the 1999-2000 school year. Some of these changes were intended to make the system fairer to the schools being graded. For instance, the State Board of Education excluded the test scores of students who had not been in attendance the full school year from the calculation of school grades (i.e., mobile students). The State Board of Education also raised the threshold for student absentee and suspension rates which had previously held some schools from attaining an A grade. We concluded that these changes seemed reasonable.

However, the department did not fully evaluate and disclose the extent to which these changes had affected school grades when it reported program performance.[23] Several months after school grades had been published for 1999-2000, the department reported that excluding the FCAT scores of students who were not in attendance during the second and third full-time equivalent student membership survey periods affected 131 (5.4%) schools with 109 schools receiving higher grades and 22 schools receiving lower grades due to the change. The department should examine and disclose the effect that changing school grading criteria has on school grades when it reports program performance.

Changes in tests each year may account for performance results

According to the Department of Education, changes in test administration also may affect test results. For instance, the FCAT writing test provides a basis for identifying trends in writing over a period of several years, but does not provide an exact index of changes in performance from one year to the next. The writing assessment employs one topic for each type of writing at each grade level. Because a topic given in any one year, by its nature, may be somewhat easier or harder for students to respond to than the topic given the previous year, differences seen in the results from one year to the next are likely due to both differences in the difficulty of the topics as well as actual changes in student achievement. The department staff report that they are creating a new language arts test to address this issue.

Shifts in student population may affect school performance

Department of Education officials said that shifts in student populations might also affect school-level performance. For instance, if the lowest-performing students were spread across several schools, the percentage of such students in each school would be smaller than if concentrated in a

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[23] While we could not determine the impact of the changes in the grading formula on school grades, we estimated that approximately 16% (24 of 150) of schools that improved from a grade of B to an A likely did so because the formula used to calculate school performance grades changed rather than improvements in student absentee and/or out-of-school suspension rates. These schools received a grade of B in 1998-99 rather than an A because they had student absentee or out-of-school suspensions rates above the state average. While this change did affect some schools' grades (24), most schools (126) improved their grades from B to A due to other factors such as improved student performance.

fewer number of schools. Again, if the state's accountability system is fully implemented, the calculation of individual student learning gains should alleviate this issue.

Students may learn subject material at different rates

The nature of skills tested may also explain differences in test scores. According to education officials, it may be more difficult to make gains in reading scores because reading comprehension is a more complex skill. For example, the FCAT does not just measure whether students can describe facts from the passage read, but whether they can put information together and develop conclusions from the information presented. As a result, improvements in reading scores may take more time, as reading comprehension is a cumulative skill that may be harder for students to grasp. As discussed in Chapter 5, schools and school districts implemented several initiatives during the 1999-2000 school year to improve student achievement, including a focus on reading skills.

Studies conflict on factors that explain student achievement

Academic literature is rich with studies that contradict the effects that various inputs have on student achievement. For example, a recent study by RAND, *Improving Student Achievement: What NAEP State Test Scores Tell Us*, found that some states are more successful with similar students and these differences in performance can be explained, in part, by per pupil expenditures. In contrast, a recent study by the American Legislative Exchange Council, *Report Card on American Education*, states that " . . . 20 years of history shows that the conventional view that more money improves student achievement is wrong . . . factors that affect student achievement appear to be much broader and deeper than these inputs" (i.e., per-pupil spending, teachers salaries, lower pupil-teacher ratios).

Department's inspector general developed data monitoring plan, but has yet to implement it

The department has automated processes to detect data errors, but needs to compare a sample of summary performance data against source documents

To give policymakers and the public confidence in the performance indicated by the measures, performance data must be accurate and reliable. While the department's information system contains edits that identify some erroneous data, these edits cannot detect all errors. The department reviews data for reasonableness and provides reports to schools and school districts for their review. However, it does not check a sample of the performance data it receives against source documents. Florida law holds school districts responsible for the accuracy of all data transmitted to the department. According to state law, agency inspectors general are responsible for assessing the reliability and validity of performance data reported by agencies and making recommendations for needed improvements.[24] Florida law also requires that state agencies'

[24] See s. 20.055, *F.S.*

inspectors general develop a plan for monitoring and reviewing the state agencies' major programs to ensure that performance data are maintained and supported by agency records. [25]

Inspector general's monitoring plan should be strengthened

The Department of Education's inspector general has developed a monitoring plan that provides general direction in assessing the accuracy, reliability, and validity of the department's reported performance data. However, the inspector general has not yet implemented that plan. The implementation of the inspector general's plan is particularly important because the Equity in Educational Opportunity Task Force found that school districts inconsistently use terms and reporting methods, which makes the data less useful for accountability purposes. OPPAGA's review of the plan found that it could be strengthened by

- specifying which performance data are considered most at risk for error and which data are most critical to making decisions such as data related to school grades,
- detailing what data elements and what data testing may be necessary to ensure accuracy and reliability, and
- addressing how the inspector general will assess whether districts are using the same definition for coding data such as student "absences."

However, the implementation of the plan was deferred due to other activities that were of a higher priority. For example, the inspector general recently conducted two special studies related to the accuracy and reliability of K-12 performance data. In the first study, the inspector general investigated 15 allegations of improprieties on FCAT tests and found evidence in some cases that the improprieties did occur, but the Florida Department of Law Enforcement found insufficient criminal intent to warrant prosecution in these instances.

The inspector general conducted a second study on the low ninth and tenth grade reading performance on the norm-referenced portion of the FCAT test (as measured by Form T of the Stanford 9 test produced by Harcourt General, Inc.). The Commissioner of Education directed the inspector general to investigate the reasons for the results. The inspector general found no conclusive evidence that explained the outcome. Several potential factors were reviewed, such as inaccurate scanning of answer sheets, incorrectly scoring student responses, and large number of omitted answers by students. However, no evidence was found to indicate that problems in these areas occurred.

[25] See s. 11.513(2), *F.S.*

Conclusions and recommendations

School grades have improved significantly in the past two years. Most notably, a large number of elementary schools improved, as did schools that formerly received a grade of F. However, these results should be interpreted with caution. Until more information such as individual student learning gains is available, it is difficult to fully separate real performance gains from other non-performance-related factors that influence school grades such as changes in student populations over time. The planned enhancements to the school grading system should resolve many of these issues. The Legislature should continue to develop and implement its accountability system for public schools. Several changes planned during the next few years such as higher achievement level cutoff scores and the calculation of individual student learning gains (i.e., the value-added system) will strengthen accountability. We recommend that the Department of Education evaluate and make known the effect of these changes when program performance is reported to provide more meaningful interpretation of program performance data.

It is imperative that data used by the department for accountability of public schools are reliable and valid because the public uses it to assess the quality of its education system, teachers make changes in their teaching methods to affect results, and funding decisions are made at state and local levels based on it. While the department uses some data validity checks, we recommend that the Department of Education's inspector general improve and implement his monitoring plan. The department's inspector general should revise the plan to describe how program performance data will be monitored to ensure it is maintained and supported by agency records. In addition, the inspector general should improve the plan by prioritizing activities and detailing a method to detect problematic data and to recommend ways to ensure data is consistently coded. The recommendations should include the data elements to be examined (e.g., those most at risk for error), the testing to be conducted, and how the consistency of district coding of data will be assessed. The inspector general's revisions to the plan also should address the Equity in Educational Opportunity Task Force recommendations that a simpler and more standardized method of data collection be established to ensure greater accuracy and clarity in reporting this information.

Chapter 5

Schools Taking Reasonable Steps to Address Academic Priorities

Schools are responding to the A+ plan by focusing on implementing initiatives to improve student performance primarily in reading, writing, and math, the areas tested by the FCAT and on which school grades are based. Schools and districts are using a variety of programs to increase reading, writing, and math scores. While some of these initiatives are focused on helping previously non-proficient children become proficient in reading, writing, and math, others are directed at increasing FCAT scores through teaching test-taking strategies.

Background

Florida schools are being held increasingly accountable for improving student performance. At the same time, many schools are faced with large percentages of students from low-income families, students who often are not performing academically on grade level, and parents who are not as involved with their children's education as schools would like them to be. Schools that received grades of D and F and are in need of the most academic improvement are serving a disproportionate percentage of students with these characteristics. However, these challenges are not isolated to schools receiving grades of D and F. Almost half of the schools graded in the 1999-2000 school year can be classified as high poverty schools. [26]

OPPAGA conducted a statewide survey of 531 school principals in Florida to identify school improvement strategies being implemented throughout the state. [27] To identify in more detail what schools were doing to improve student performance, we also visited 34 primarily D and F graded schools in five school districts and interviewed school and district

[26] For purposes of this report, a school is designated as a high poverty school if 50% or more of its students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. This is a conservative estimate, as not all students who are eligible apply for free and reduced price lunch. This is particularly true in middle and high schools.

[27] OPPAGA provided 2,392 of the state's principals an opportunity to respond to our survey, 531 responded. The purpose of this survey was to identify what schools across the state were doing to improve student performance and to supplement information collected during our onsite visits to schools and districts. The results of this survey should be interpreted carefully due to the survey response rate.

administrators, teachers, school advisory council members, and parents.[28] For more information on the schools and districts visited and principals surveyed, see Appendix B.

Schools focused on reading, writing, and math

Schools are initiating academic programs, staffing changes, and resource shifts to improve student achievement

Schools are focusing on improving student performance primarily in reading, writing, and math. These are the three areas currently tested by the state FCAT examination and on which each school's grade is based. The 34 schools we visited were implementing a mixture of initiatives such as specific academic programs, staffing changes, and resource shifts to improve student performance. While the initiatives varied by school and district, there were common themes across the schools. During our interviews, we asked the school staff to identify the three most significant initiatives they implemented during the 1999-2000 school year to improve student performance and their school grade.

Most schools are concentrating on reading

Most schools focused on reading to improve student performance. Eighty-seven percent (461 of 531) of principals surveyed and 31 of 34 schools we visited reported they were implementing strategies to improve students' reading ability. Most often these strategies included new or modified phonics-based programs to improve student reading achievement. Common programs included Science Research Associates (SRA) Direct Instruction, which has a strong research base that shows success in teaching low-income students to read, and Accelerated Reader, which requires students to read books and take computer-based assessments to verify they comprehend what they have read. Some of the reading programs varied by district and school. For instance, a middle school in Marion County implemented a reading program called "Great Leaps." The theory behind this program is that it is too difficult to teach an eighth grader to read using lower level reading materials, such as Dr. Seuss, even if that material is the student's current reading ability level. Great Leaps requires students to read stories with vocabulary words at their current reading level; however, the content is specifically designed to keep older students interested in reading.

Most schools also are focusing on improving student writing

Many schools focused on improving students' writing skills. Eighty-one percent (432 of 531) of principals responding to our survey and 21 of the 34 schools we visited identified writing as one of their top three initiatives to improve student performance. Writing initiatives included school-wide writing prompts by which all students are given a topic and asked to write as if they were taking the FCAT writing test, and/or integrating writing exercises into the curricula of subjects such as science, math, and social studies to ensure that students had a variety of opportunities and settings in which to write. For example, a middle school in Marion

[28] We visited Marion, Palm Beach, Miami-Dade, Escambia, and Gadsden counties.

County required students to write in every subject area, including physical education, to ensure they were exposed to writing. Another middle school instituted "The Principal's Writing Club." This program consists of the principal announcing a writing topic during the morning announcements. The students had three weeks in which to complete the writing (supervised by their Language Arts Teacher). The principal then chose the 15 top papers, read the students' names on the announcements, posted their writings, and the students received a t-shirt designed by a team of students and donated by a community-based organization. [29] At the end of the school year all club members were invited to a pizza party. In addition, schools provided training for teachers in the area of writing. This training included information on the FCAT writing rubric: what it is, how it is used, and how to score the students writing using the same system used to score the FCAT writing test.

Schools are also taking steps to strengthen math instruction

Math is the third area in which schools are working to improve student performance. Eighty percent of the principals responding to our survey (426 of 531) and 16 of 34 schools we visited identified mathematics as a primary focus for improvement during the school year. Common math strategies implemented by schools included rearranging the schedule so students have a 90-minute block of intensive math instruction every day; some schools required this of all students while other schools required only students who were not proficient in math to enroll. Math improvement strategies also varied by school. For example, a high school in Palm Beach County had a "math question of the day" every day in its morning announcements. The students were given a math question in FCAT format, given time to solve the question, then shown in detail how to solve the question correctly.

Schools are also using other initiatives to improve student performance

In addition, schools implemented other initiatives to improve student performance. These initiatives included tutoring, mentoring, and class-size reduction to provide additional instruction to students who were significantly behind grade level in one or more subjects. Tutoring and mentoring programs were conducted during the day as part of the regular routine, as well as after school and on Saturdays. Class size reduction was implemented school-wide in some cases. However, because it was often too expensive for many schools to implement, some schools reduced class sizes in particular subject areas, grade level (i.e., those being tested by FCAT that year), targeted groups or students, and/or for short periods of time for remedial work for a specific topic. For example, one elementary school reduced class size in grades four and five,

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[29] Topics included "Make believe you are a birthday cake about to be served at a child's birthday party. Tell me what you are expecting and how you are feeling" and "Make Believe you are the baseball about to be hit by Mark McGwire for his record 70th home run. Tell me everything you are feeling at that moment."

the grades tested by the FCAT. Another school reduced class size for remedial classes only. [30]

Schools also focused on a variety of other initiatives specifically designed to improve student performance on the FCAT tests. These initiatives involved test-taking skill development to prepare students for the format and nature of the questions included in the FCAT to ensure that students would feel comfortable with the examination. Most schools purchased FCAT preparation materials including workbooks for the children to work on before they took the test. Other examples of FCAT preparation activities included taking practice tests in an environment set up in the same manner as in the actual FCAT environment and teachers formatting their individual assessments to be similar to the FCAT.

Exhibit 17
Schools Are Implementing a Variety of Initiatives to Improve Student Performance

Subject		Example of Initiatives Implemented
Reading	87% (461 of 531) of principals responding to our survey and 31 of the 34 schools visited	Direct Instruction (SRA), Failure Free Reading, Reading Rescue, Accelerated Reader, Reading Recovery, Literacy First, Great Leaps, reading in a 90-minute block, reading classes in high school, silent sustained reading (SSR), Developmental Reading.
Writing	81% (432 of 531) of principals responding to our survey and 21 of the 34 schools visited	Demand writing, writing across the curriculum, pen teams, professional development, power writing, The Principal's Writing Club, county-wide writing program (i.e., Escambia Writes!), tutoring/mentoring, Saturday/after school remediation
Math	80% (426 of 531) of principals responding to our survey 16 of the 34 schools visited	Acaletics, Saxson Math, FCAT math problem of the day, restructuring algebra one, 90-minute time block for math, intensive math, tutoring/ mentoring, Saturday/after school remediation

Source: OPPAGA field visit interviews in 34 schools and survey of principals.

Elementary, middle, and high schools vary on their approaches to improve student achievement

The types of initiatives implemented to improve student performance differed by level of school. For example, elementary schools focused more often than secondary schools on reducing class size, mentoring, and other individualized or one-on-one intervention strategies to provide additional assistance to struggling students. The schools accomplished this by using a variety of funding sources such as state supplemental academic instruction funds, Title I funds, and grant monies. In contrast, middle schools often concentrated on strategies to increase student motivation and improve student behavior. For example, 43% (38 of 89) of

[30] In the past two sessions, the Legislature appropriated a total of $1,341,192,571 for class size reduction, and $1,500,000 in the 2000-01 budget designated to study the effects of class size reduction on student performance. In addition to state funding, schools have used Title I funds as well as federal dollars earmarked for class size reduction to reduce the teacher-to-student ratios.

the middle school principals that responded to our survey indicated that they needed additional technical assistance in identifying strategies to decrease discipline problems. An example of a strategy employed by a middle school to increase student motivation was to require that students who wanted to take elective courses be on academic grade level. Students in this school who were working on grade level were allowed to take two electives, while non-proficient students were required to take a remedial course in place of one of their electives. When the students became proficient, they were allowed to transfer from the remedial class into the elective of their choice. Some high schools were moving beyond traditional approaches to improve the performance of their students. For example, one high school we visited expanded its English classes to include basic reading skills in addition to grammar and literature. The principal of this school believed that this change was needed to help increase the reading achievement, particularly of students who were significantly below grade level.

School district direction and assistance could be improved

Districts have focused efforts to improve low-performing schools

We also examined the strategies that school districts are using to assist their D and F graded schools. Districts focused their efforts primarily on schools needing the most improvement. While the activities they implemented varied among the five school districts visited, the districts generally provided technical assistance and directed schools to implement specific academic programs. All five school districts had hired (or reclassified positions) a liaison between the district, state, and D and F schools to help the schools improve student performance. School districts also sponsored professional development activities. For example, Marion County held a month-long summer teaching academy to ensure that teachers got the training they needed to improve student performance and implement initiatives. This program allowed teachers to receive needed professional development in addition to that traditionally provided during the summer, which avoided pulling the teachers from classrooms during the school year, thus giving the students more time on task. In addition, four of the five districts required F schools to implement uniform reading, writing, and/or math programs such as mentoring and phonics-based reading. The districts also provided assistance to reduce class size, identify effective learning strategies, and ensure that teachers received needed training to improve student performance.

District intervention and assistance plans were vague

School districts are required by Florida law to develop two-year district assistance and intervention plans that describe the strategies they plan to implement to improve student performance at schools receiving a D or F

grade.[31] However, the districts we visited had plans of varying quality. For example, Palm Beach County had a comprehensive assistance and intervention plan for each school with a school performance grade of F. The plans were diagnostic and listed strategies to fit the specific school improvement needs of each school.

Some plans identified strategies to improve individual school performance, while other plans were vague and did not describe specifically what the district planned to do to improve student performance at individual schools. For instance, a plan from one of the five districts broadly indicated that the district planned to do things such as conduct needs assessments, review school improvement plans, identify problem areas, identify solutions, and revise the current school improvement plans. The district's plan did not provide detail on the specific initiatives, such as academic programs, staffing changes, or resource shifts that would be implemented to improve student performance at low-performing schools. In addition, the district did not tailor the plan to the specific needs of individual schools. Generally, none of the school districts we visited adequately aligned their assistance and intervention plans with other key planning documents such as the district strategic plan and budget to ensure that they are consistent with other major district initiatives and needed resources are available.

Schools are facing several challenges to improving student performance

Several barriers need to be removed to improve student performance. We identified these barriers based on our interviews, surveys, and observations during project fieldwork. These barriers include

- a lack of reliable research on initiatives that are effective at increasing student performance;
- timing of the school improvement planning process;
- lack of parent involvement;
- teacher retention and recruitment problems; and
- low student readiness at all grade levels.

Schools lack reliable research on effective strategies

An important barrier to improving student performance is that schools lack reliable, independent research on strategies that are effective at increasing the academic performance of students similar to theirs. The department indicates that it provides research on effective strategies with specific student populations, for use by teachers and principals, on their websites and through other means. However, most school staff were either not aware or did not utilize this resource. In general, schools based

[31] See s. 230.23(16)(c), *F.S.*

their decisions on whether to implement a particular improvement initiative on information provided by the vendors selling the instructional materials, training, and supplies. While vendors provided information that the initiatives were effective at improving student performance, principals had no independent data to verify these assertions. For example, principals at the 34 schools generally were not aware of independent research on effective strategies for improving performance in student populations similar to the population in their schools. Besides being potentially ineffective, instructional materials, training, and supplies associated with these initiatives can be expensive.

Contributing to this problem is the fact that schools often implemented multiple programs aimed at improving student performance and were unable to isolate the effectiveness of individual programs. These schools often added new initiatives to those programs already implemented without eliminating existing programs. For example, one school, in addition to implementing Science Research Associates (SRA) Direct Instruction, also implemented the Accelerated Reader Program, the Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR) Program, and Aim Activities, all of which are reading programs. The school could not determine whether changes in student performance were due to one or more of these programs. Therefore the school had no way to determine whether to eliminate one or more of the programs. In some cases, this was confusing to teachers who implemented the numerous programs and was expensive to school districts.

The timing of the school improvement planning process is not aligned with the state testing cycle

The timing of the state-mandated planning process is another barrier faced by schools trying to improve student performance. Many schools did not have their student performance initiatives listed in their school improvement plans (SIP) because the FCAT scores and school grades were received after the school improvement process was complete, and the school board had already approved the SIPs. Most schools either did not use or were unaware that plans could be amended after FCAT scores were received. Typically, plans are due to the school board for approval before the end of the school year. In order to have plans ready for school board approval before the end of the school year, school advisory councils must use prior year FCAT test data.[32] Thus, the school advisory council cannot assess the effectiveness of their current year's improvement initiatives prior to developing next year's plan. If the schools do not have current student performance data when developing their SIPs, the resulting plans may be of limited use in improving student performance. In addition, School Advisory Councils (SACs) cannot adequately assess the effectiveness of strategies in their current year plans without current state testing data. Release of the FCAT scores was substantially delayed

[32] State law already allows school boards to approve continuation plans (refer to s. 230.23(16)(a), *F.S.*). School districts can use this flexibility to delay amending of plans until after school grades and FCAT scores are received.

during the 1999-2000 school year because the testing company responsible for processing the FCAT did not meet delivery deadlines. As a result, it appeared that schools were merely going through the motions in order to satisfy the requirements of the law rather than developing useful school improvement plans. The department is taking steps to issue school grades and FCAT scores prior to the end of the school year.

The lack of parental involvement is a barrier to improving student performance

Another barrier to improved student performance is low parental involvement. Research indicates that students whose parents are involved with their education are more likely to succeed academically than other students with similar economic and social backgrounds.[33] Eleven of 34 principals interviewed identified lack of parental involvement as a barrier to improving student performance. In addition, 52% of principals responding to this question in our survey said they needed technical assistance in the area of developing strategies to improve parental involvement. In general, educators believed that parents needed to follow through with students at home on school assignments and homework, volunteer more at schools, and support teachers in dealing with discipline problems. OPPAGA's findings are consistent with the conclusions of the Equity in Educational Opportunity Task Force, which found parental involvement is critical to improving student achievement and recommended that principals, superintendents, and their leadership teams should be responsible and accountable for ensuring parental and community involvement.

Schools we visited were implementing initiatives to increase the level of parental involvement with varying degrees of success. For example, one school that served a heavily Hispanic and Haitian community distributed school information in English, Spanish, and Creole to better communicate with non-English speaking parents. Other schools changed the time that they held parent meetings such as School Advisory Council and Parent Teacher Organization/Parent Teacher Association (PTO/PTA) meetings to better accommodate working parents, while other schools sent parent interest surveys to determine the types of activities they would like the school to provide for them. One school in Escambia County held a "learning fair" on a Saturday to educate parents in the specifics of the FCAT. Organized much like a carnival, the fair had booths set up with sample problems and asked parents to try to solve them. One key component to the success of this event was that the school provided transportation for parents.

Schools across the state are having a difficult time attracting and retaining quality teachers

Schools across the state are having a difficult time attracting and retaining the quality teachers needed to improve student performance. Almost all the schools we visited (31 of 34) identified the recruitment and retention of quality teachers as a barrier. In addition, 246 of 505 (49%) principals that responded to this question on our survey said they needed assistance

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[33] *Improving Student Performance in High Poverty Schools*, OPPAGA Report No. 96-86, June 1997.

identifying effective teacher recruitment strategies. Although school districts may have had incentives, until the 2000 legislative session and the passage of Educate 2000, there was no specific state-sponsored incentive for teachers to teach at D and F schools.[34] The problem is aggravated by the current teacher shortage in Florida and across the country. According to Department of Education projections, by the 2004-05 school year Florida will need a total of 141,071 teachers (in 1999-2000, there were 132,554 teachers).

Several factors contribute to this problem. Student enrollment in K-12 is growing and is projected to continue to increase over the next century. In part this is due to increasing immigration as well as the emergence of a second baby boom. Simultaneously, growing numbers of teacher retirements are occurring and are predicted to continue in the coming years. One estimate suggests that one-third of the nation's teachers are likely to retire within the decade. Compounding these factors are two others. First, attrition rates among new teachers are high. Some estimates suggest that one in five new teachers leaves within five years. The best and brightest new teachers have the highest turnover, as graduates with College Entrance Examination scores in the top quartile were twice as likely as their peers in the bottom quartile to have left teaching. Other students who were prepared to teach never entered the profession. Second, a current emphasis on reducing class size increases the number of teachers required for staffing. In combination, these factors create an increasingly problematic trend toward a shortage of teachers.

To address this issue, districts and schools have developed improved recruitment methods that include stepping up the recruitment of teachers and college of education graduates from other states. Schools and districts also have offered stipends to attract teachers to schools particularly difficult to staff. For example, in Palm Beach County, those who choose to teach in Belle Glade, located on the extreme western part of Palm Beach County, receive a stipend of $2,000 in addition to their regular salary. The passage of Educate 2000 also promoted alternative certification programs (i.e., midlife career changes and military retirees) as a route to becoming a teacher. Educate 2000 began its implementation during the 2000-01 school year and may help solve this problem; however, it is too soon to measure the effectiveness of this new law.

In addition, in the fall of 2000, the Department of Education established TeacherNet, an on-line teacher recruitment and support system.[35] TeacherNet permits school districts to post job vacancies in one location that is easily accessible to teacher applicants. The site facilitates the placement of teachers' resumes on-line for review by district personnel responsible for hiring teachers. TeacherNet also assists teachers in

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[34] See Ch. 2000-301, *Laws of Florida*.

[35] Refer to the following Internet address: http://www.teacherinflorida.com

preparing resumes, obtaining relocation data, and accessing information regarding teacher certification and teaching standards.

Student readiness for the next level of education is also a problem

Twenty-four of the 34 schools visited mentioned student readiness to learn as a barrier to improving student performance. Student readiness is typically associated with readiness to start kindergarten. Although this issue was listed as a major barrier by elementary school principals, continuing readiness problems exist in middle and high schools. According to our respondents, some students start kindergarten behind in needed skills or not ready to learn. When these students leave elementary school for middle school, they are sometimes still behind in academic skills. These skill deficits continue, and the students may still be behind by the time they reach high school. These ongoing skill deficits thus hinder students' performance throughout their academic careers.

In response to the lack of student readiness for the next grade, the 1999 Legislature passed two initiatives. It passed sweeping early childhood readiness legislation designed to ensure that children, particularly those most at risk for academic failure, are ready to enter kindergarten. [36] Although not fully implemented, the changes included developing local coalitions with a unified waiting list for subsidized preschool placement, combining all early childhood funding streams to maximize services, and creating a single sliding scale for payment of fees for preschool services. The Legislature also amended Florida law to end social promotion by providing that students who do not pass the reading portion of the FCAT in fourth grade may not be promoted to fifth grade unless the school can demonstrate "good cause" to promote that student. [37]

Conclusions and recommendations

Florida's educational accountability system is on the right track. Once current legislation is fully implemented, many of the barriers to improving student performance should be resolved. However, there are several areas in need of improvement. Schools have a difficult time researching strategies to improve student performance and getting parents involved with their child's education. In addition the school improvement planning process needs to be aligned with the release of standardized test scores and school grades.

The department should work with the school districts and OPPAGA in developing a research bank

Although the Department of Education indicates that it provides many research-based best practices and other research-based information through its Wave series, schools are still grasping at straws when it comes to methods for improving student performance. We recommend that the Department of Education work with the school districts and consult with

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[36] See Ch. 99-357, *Laws of Florida*.

[37] See Ch. 99-398, *Laws of Florida*.

the State Technology Office and OPPAGA to improve the dissemination of this information through a web-based research bank. This research bank should contain research on both state and national topics, which will help school-based personnel make well-informed, research-based decisions on the effectiveness and efficiency of instructional strategies and materials. This web-based research bank will enable schools to easily access the latest valid and reliable research on these topics.

The department should work with school districts to develop indicators to measure parental involvement in the schools

The Department of Education's Office of Family Involvement provides resources, training, and technical assistance for parents, schools, and communities to support families in making choices that will promote a high-quality education for their children in both public and private settings. This office should work with school districts to develop district indicators to measure parental involvement in the schools. Such measures could include the number and type of parental outreach programs schools implement, attendance rates at parent-teacher conferences, and the number of hours parents work in volunteer activities. Information resulting from these measures should be used to identify successful strategies so that they can be transferred to other schools.

The department should assist school districts to better align key aspects of the school improvement and planning process

The department, with input from OPPAGA, should assist school districts in aligning key aspects of the school improvement and planning process. For example, strategies or models for aligning planning processes could be disseminated to districts in the department's Wave series technical assistance publication and on its website. If the school improvement and planning process has key planning aspects aligned—including School Improvement Plans, Academic Assistance and Intervention Plans, District Improvement Plans, District Strategic Plans, and school and district budgets—the resulting plans will be more thorough, complete, and useful.

Chapter 6

School Districts' Accountability Systems Need to Be Strengthened

While the A+ plan provides a good basis for assessing statewide educational achievement and the performance of individual public schools, the plan is not designed to assess the performance of school districts. Our prior reviews have shown that school districts do a poor job demonstrating that the decisions they make and the services and programs they provide are efficient and effective. Like other publicly funded entities, school districts should be held accountable to parents and other taxpayers for the performance and cost of their major academic programs and support services. However, school districts we have reviewed generally had not established program-level goals, objectives, and measures, and do not routinely evaluate their overall performance. Without such mechanisms, school districts are unable to demonstrate that they are good stewards of public resources.

Background

An effectively administered school district has a central office that provides leadership and accountability through a lean, responsive organizational structure that maximizes the allocation of funds to both educational and operational programs. State-level accountability data provides high-level performance information on how well students and schools are doing on reading, math, and writing. This assessment data provides year-end, point-in-time feedback on the overall effectiveness of local efforts to educate students.

School districts need performance data to make informed decisions

However, school districts need additional ongoing, program-specific performance information to enable them to make informed management decisions throughout the year and to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of individual academic programs (such as exceptional student education and programs for students most at risk for failure) and services (such as facilities, food, and transportation). This performance data enables school districts to answer critical questions such as

- "How well is each program doing?"
- "Should we make mid-course adjustments, or discontinue this program or initiative?" and
- "Are we delivering services in the most efficient manner?"

Without this information, school districts and schools can be left to add new programs on top of old ones because they do not know what programs are or are not working. This may result in the continuation of costly and potentially ineffective programs.

These accountability data are needed at the district level because state accountability data are not intended to be used to evaluate individual school programs and is limited in its ability to answer these questions for individual programs and services. Furthermore, because school districts have considerable control over their individual learning environments and resource allocations, they are in a much better position than the state to collect data, set performance expectations, and measure the performance and efficiency of the programs and services they provide.

District accountability systems should provide direction to staff

An effective district-level accountability system should provide clear direction and context for the daily activities of program staff and includes the following:

- clearly stated goals and measurable outcome-oriented objectives;
- appropriate performance and cost-efficiency measures and benchmarks that include appropriate standards from comparable school districts, government agencies, and private industry;
- evaluation of performance and cost-efficiency, including the potential of cost-saving alternatives; and
- public reporting of performance and cost-efficiency information.

OPPAGA evaluated the adequacy of district program-level goals, objectives, performance measures, benchmarks, and evaluation processes by using the performance accountability best practices.[38] These best practices were developed as part of the Best Financial Management Practices Program created by the Legislature in 1997 to assess district stewardship of public resources, identify potential cost savings, and to improve district management of funds (see Appendix D for a complete list of performance accountability best practices which were adopted by the Commissioner of Education in October 2000). We applied these best practices to nine districts—the five districts we visited for this report and the four districts that have received full Best Financial Management Practices Reviews to date.

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[38] OPPAGA incorporated the findings of four published Best Financial Management Practices Reviews including the school districts of Brevard, Manatee, Martin, and Polk counties with a limited review of the use of performance accountability best practices in five school districts (Dade, Escambia, Gadsden, Marion, and Palm Beach counties). The limited review included conducting site visits to school districts, interviewing district program administrators, and reviewing available program documents. The studies were published in 1998 and 1999.

School districts lack clear goals and objectives for major programs

All of the districts reviewed could improve the program level goals and objectives

While school districts vary in the extent to which they have developed program-level goals and objectives, none of the nine districts we examined had clearly stated goals and measurable objectives for all their major educational and operational programs. For instance, districts generally had broad district-level goals such as "improve student achievement," but rarely had program-level measurable outcome objectives such as "at least 90% of students in basic education gain at least one year's learning in reading in one year's time." In addition, the district accountability systems we reviewed were generally fragmented because the existing goals and objectives were developed at various administrative levels and did not clearly relate to one another. The nine school districts more often had established goals and objectives for educational programs, but these needed to be expanded and improved to better address major aspects of each educational program's purpose and expenditures and better identify the district's expectations for measurable program results.

In addition, once developed, goals and objectives need to be widely communicated to all stakeholders. The Equity in Educational Opportunity Task Force found poor communication of student achievement goals and objectives. The task force recommended that principals, superintendents, and their leadership teams be held accountable for ensuring that established goals and objectives related to student achievement are clearly communicated to school personnel, parents, students, and the community.

Goals and measurable objectives should provide a framework for decisions

Goals and objectives for each major operational and educational program are needed to provide district program staff direction for establishing priorities for daily activities, identifying data that needs to be collected to assess whether a program or service is meeting expectations, and determining when to change strategies or program activities to better serve students. Because each piece of a school district accountability system is interrelated, in the absence of an adequate set of program-level goals and objectives, district program managers often had difficulty

- demonstrating that their daily activities result in improvements to program performance;
- developing work processes that supported efficient and effective accomplishment of performance objectives; and
- effectively communicating values, directions, and expectations as the basis for the district's key decisions and actions.

All school districts should, if not already implemented, establish program-level goals and objectives to ensure programs have adequate direction

and oversight. Lack of program-level goals and objectives may impede the efforts of senior district administrators, such as assistant superintendents who are responsible for overseeing numerous related programs, to review the performance of programs in their administrative units and to help provide rationale for and build consistency behind critical decisions such as allocation of resources.

School districts had insufficient performance measures and benchmarks

None of the districts studied had established measures for all major programs

While school districts we studied varied in the extent to which they have developed performance and cost-efficiency measures, none of the nine districts reviewed had established performance and cost-efficiency measures for all their major educational and operational programs. For instance, districts typically established FCAT test scores as indicators of basic education performance. However, the districts rarely had established cost-efficiency measures such as operational cost per student or maintenance cost per square foot. Some administrators we spoke to could not address basic questions about program performance and cost or assess progress toward program goals and objectives. Districts most often had established broad performance measures for educational programs, but in general needed to expand them to ensure that they addressed the performance and cost-efficiency of all major programs.

Measures and benchmarks should be used to assess program performance and cost-efficiency

Performance and cost-efficiency measures provide data needed to assess whether a district is progressing toward the expected outcomes set for each major program in the most cost-efficient manner. For example, school districts could adopt measures relating to their facilities, such as the cost per square foot to build new classrooms and the cost per square foot to provide custodial services. In addition, food service operations need to be monitored for student meal participation rates and meal costs. By developing such measures, district administrators and school board members in the nine school districts reviewed would have information to better address basic issues related to program performance and cost-efficiency such as whether to increase or decrease funds to a particular program, if services are being provided in the most cost-efficient manner and if the district should contract for services.

Districts lack performance benchmarks

Further contributing to the districts' difficulty assessing program performance and cost with the limited data they collected was the fact that none of the nine districts had established adequate benchmarks for all major educational and operational programs. Without benchmarks, program administrators and school board members had difficulty determining or readily demonstrating that program performance and cost were acceptable. Some districts compared their performance and cost to other school districts for programs such as transportation and food

service. However, these comparisons had limited usefulness because program administrators generally had not clearly defined acceptable performance to help them interpret their performance data (e.g., whether the district was seeking to be the top school district, in the middle of peer districts, within 10% of the industry average, etc.). Also, administrators did not report the status of their programs in relation to these comparisons, and the comparisons that were made did not link to the goals and objectives established to guide each program. Thus, administrators and the school boards generally would not be able to determine whether program performance and cost met expectations or were within acceptable limits.

All school districts should if not already implemented, develop performance measures and benchmarks to adequately assess the extent to which programs and services they provide are performing at acceptable levels and are cost-efficient. Without a comprehensive set of performance and cost-efficiency measures and benchmarks that link to each program's purpose, goals, and objectives, district administrators and school board members may have insufficient information to answer basic questions related to program performance and cost efficiency.

School districts did not adequately evaluate or publicly report on program performance and cost

Regular evaluation can identify ways to improve program performance

Another accountability weakness we noted was that none of the nine districts reviewed adequately evaluated the performance and cost of all their major programs. The districts conduct only limited assessments and few formal program evaluations. The evaluations that were done were hindered because the districts lacked clear goals, objectives, performance and cost-efficiency measures, and benchmarks for their programs. For instance, the districts generally did not tie district data to the achievement of program goals and objectives and did not evaluate whether major programs were effective in increasing student achievement or whether initiatives had met their intended purpose. Districts did conduct some formal evaluations of federal programs. These evaluations provided a large amount of data and other information about these programs, but did not provide a clear answer to critical questions such as

- "How successful is the program in meeting the district's expectations?" and
- "How can the program be improved?"

In addition, while the nine districts had conducted a limited number of cost-related evaluations of operational programs and services, such as custodial services, food services, warehousing, and printing services, they

generally did not examine the cost, including cost-benefit analysis, of major educational programs.

Additional accountability information would increase the ability of the public to hold school districts accountable

The nine school districts provided some performance information to school advisory councils, parents, and other taxpayers but did not provide complete performance and cost-efficiency information to the public. For example, the districts annually provided school accountability reports to parents as required by law. However, while these reports provided parents and other taxpayers generalized performance data at the school level, they did not provide similar information on operational programs and provided no cost-efficiency data. These reports do not contain important information such as whether major investments such as in reading initiatives are cost efficient compared to other reading programs. Given the districts' substantial investment in these programs and services, it is important that parents and other taxpayers are informed of the return on these investments. However, school districts generally conducted too few assessments of program performance and cost to enable them to provide complete information to the public.

All school districts should conduct evaluations, including periodic assessments and formal program evaluations, to identify ways to improve performance and save money. Without evaluative information, school board members and district administrators can have difficultly determining the extent to which programs are progressing towards overall stated goals and objectives and identifying ways to improve.

School districts should improve controls over program performance data

While the nine districts implemented strategies to assess the reliability of mainframe information systems, the districts needed to better ensure the accuracy and reliability of data, particularly for information maintained outside of their mainframe systems. Improvements in data accuracy and enhancements to the management information systems would improve the utility of information for administrators.

Adequate procedures help to ensure the accuracy and reliability of data

Districts generally established reasonable procedures to ensure the reliability of data contained in their mainframe databases. For instance, districts generally implemented software edit checks for applications or programs that reside on the mainframe computer. The checks helped to ensure that data are reliable, including

- determining if the data entered matched the accepted or expected values of the data element;
- determining if an inappropriate relationship exists between data elements; and

- identifying data that may or may not be inaccurate, but need further checking.

Districts also used various reports to help ensure the reliability of mainframe data. For example, one district sent class rolls to schools so teachers could verify the accuracy of information in the mainframe. In addition, the district printed discipline reports for assistant principals to review to make sure the data appeared reasonable. Districts further scrutinized the data they transmitted to the Department of Education by running additional edit reports as required by the department.

Districts need to provide greater oversight of isolated databases

However, districts generally needed to exercise greater oversight of data contained in databases independent of their mainframe systems. These data were used to manage program resources, and reported to the school board, parents, and other taxpayers in public meetings. Maintaining isolated databases is inefficient when program-level databases duplicate data contained in the district mainframe. Although program managers had devised several methods to ensure data accuracy, districts often had no way of knowing whether the data were reliable and accurate because they had not established proper oversight procedures to scrutinize data contained in these databases. Since the data are reported in public meetings and used to make management decisions, it is important that school districts have procedures in place to help ensure that the data are accurate and reliable.

All school districts should provide adequate oversight of data used to make management decisions and report on program performance to ensure that data are sufficiently complete and error free. Computer-processed data are an integral part of the decision-making process, and should be accurate and reliable.

Conclusions and recommendations

The school districts OPPAGA reviewed generally had weak accountability systems. The use of goals, objectives, performance measures, benchmarks, and evaluation varies by district and program. However, these activities should be greatly expanded. While the nine districts we reviewed have some components of a good accountability system in place or under development, components developed at different administrative levels and units generally do not relate to one another, thus resulting in a fragmented system and confusion among district staff. At the direction of the Legislature, OPPAGA developed Best Financial Management Practices for performance accountability systems that should assist school districts in further developing and refining elements of their program-level accountability systems (see Appendix D). In addition, best practices for all 14 operational and educational programs are available to districts on

OPPAGA's website.[39] Districts can use these best practices to self-assess and improve their overall performance and cost-efficiency. For related recommendations for expanding Best Financial Practices Reviews of districts, see page 60.

The Florida Education Governance Reorganization Act of 2000 (Ch. 2000-321, *Laws of Florida*) established an 11-member task force to accomplish a smooth transition between the old and new education governance models (see pages 2 and 3). In March 2001, this task force recommended to the Legislature how best to achieve education system integration. As part of this requirement, the task force considered how to improve the state's performance accountability system for K-20, including its mission, goals, and objectives.[40]

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[39] Refer to the following Internet address:
http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/school_districts/districtreviews.html

[40] Refer to the following Internet address:
http://www.myflorida.com/myflorida/government/learn/egrt_taskforce/finalReport.htm/

Chapter 7

School Districts Can Save Money by Improving Management

Currently, the A+ plan does a good job assessing educational performance of public schools. However, the state's accountability system was not designed to address whether districts are using their funds efficiently and effectively. Independent reviews of selected school districts are the main mechanism the state has to obtain this information. Expanding these reviews could provide policymakers the information needed to better assess the efficiency of the K-12 education system.

Independent reviews identified significant savings

School districts can significantly improve their use of resources. Since 1996, reviews of 11 school districts serving more than 850,000 students have identified $312,969,052 in potential five-year net cost savings and related fiscal effects in both operational and educational programs. The reviews have identified a large number of ways to control costs, reduce overhead, streamline operations, and improve services. A majority (60%) of the cost-saving recommendations were in three functional areas—facilities use and management, educational service delivery, and school district organization and management. In these areas, the reviews identified the potential to save $189,663,049.

To help all school districts in Florida learn from others' experiences, this chapter provides insight into the kinds of actions school districts can take to make more efficient use of resources.

Background

The Florida Legislature created two school district review programs to help school districts meet the challenge of educating students in a cost-effective manner. Faced with the challenge of public dissatisfaction with school district performance and use of resources, and taxpayers' unwillingness to raise local taxes for education, the Florida Legislature created the performance review program in 1996 to independently assess district management practices and use of resources. In 1997, the Legislature expanded the scrutiny of school district operations, when it directed OPPAGA and the Auditor General to develop the Best Financial Management Practices Review Program, which resulted in the nation's first assessment system for school districts based on a comprehensive set of best practices. As of December 2000, 11 school districts have undergone

an independent review, resulting in sound recommendations designed to address each district's current and long-range problems and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their operations.

Reviews identified over $312 million in potential cost savings and related fiscal effects for 11 school districts

School districts could greatly improve their operations and efficiency, leading to significant cost savings. The 11 school district reviews conducted to date have identified potential positive fiscal effects of $312,969,052 among both operational and education programs.[41] While each school district is unique, they all have similar administrative structures, service delivery methods, and programs. Thus, the recommendations of these reviews are likely to be applicable to other districts across the state. As shown in Exhibit 18, these reviews projected five-year cost savings generally varied by district size, ranging in potential savings from $57,100 in Glades County to $99,593,599 in Broward County. These cost-saving recommendations, when implemented, could be used to fund other priority issues in the school district. School districts can use the conclusions and recommendations of these reviews to examine their own operations and make adjustments to improve efficiency.

Exhibit 18
Projected Five-Year Cost Savings Generally Vary by District Size

School District	District Size[1]	Fall 2000 Student Membership	Potential Net Savings
Glades	Small	1,106	$ 57,100
Hamilton	Small	2,171	3,590,376
Martin	Medium	16,307	16,426,000
Clay	Medium	28,115	11,623,013
Manatee	Medium	36,557	35,288,243
Lee	Medium	58,351	24,762,375
Brevard	Medium	70,590	5,895,770
Polk	Medium	79,479	7,998,700
Orange	Large	150,538	52,046,775
Hillsborough	Large	164,224	55,687,101
Broward	Large	251,080	99,593,599
Total		**858,518**	**$312,969,052**

[1] For this analysis, school districts with fewer than 10,000 students are considered small, 10,001-100,000 students are medium, and over 100,000 are large.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of performance and BFMP review recommendations.

[41] A twelfth study, a Best Financial Management Practices Review of the Lake County School District, will begin in the spring of 2001.

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If implemented, the changes these reviews recommend could help districts control costs, reduce overhead, streamline operations, and improve services. The recommendations address 12 functional areas as shown in Exhibit 19.

The highest potential for cost savings was found in the facilities area

Nearly one-third ($97,920,975 of $312,969,052) of the positive fiscal effects were identified in the facilities area (see Exhibit 19). The reports found that districts could reduce facility costs by implementing value engineering to increase the cost-efficiency of the construction program, eliminating custodial staff to bring the staffing in line with industry standards, implementing year-round schools to better use facility space, and instituting energy management strategies to reduce district utility costs. Other review areas with high potential for cost savings include education service delivery, school district organization and management, student transportation, and personnel management. See Appendix E for more information on the kinds of changes districts could make in each of these areas to improve the efficiency of their operations. The reports found that districts could save primarily by streamlining management practices and cutting administrative and support staff.

Exhibit 19
A Higher Percentage of Potential Cost Savings and Related Fiscal Effects Relate to Facilities Use and Management

Departments	Potential Cost/Savings	Percentage
1. Facilities Use and Management	$ 97,920,975	31%
2. Educational Service Delivery	46,838,791	15%
3. School District Organization and Management	44,903,283	14%
4. Transportation	35,039,585	11%
5. Personnel Management	31,802,368	10%
6. Food Service	22,005,025	7%
7. Financial Management	11,331,501	4%
8. Purchasing and Warehousing	9,631,715	3%
9. Asset and Risk Management	6,652,689	2%
10. Safety and Security	3,750,175	1%
11. Community Involvement	2,068,065	1%
12. Administrative and Instructional Technology	1,024,880	1%
Total	**$312,969,052**	**100%**

Source: OPPAGA analysis of performance and BFMP review recommendations.

Reviews find over 100 ways to improve management practices

The reviews identified over 100 ways that school districts can improve operations by streamlining management practices, discontinuing functions, or by suggesting alternative processes. Recommendations included implementing a year-round, multi-track school schedule to make better use of scarce facilities, which would save $20,162,500 over five years by deferring construction costs. Additional cost savings

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opportunities included reorganizing school district departments to make them more efficient and effective, eliminating courtesy bus riders to reduce the cost of student transportation, implementing energy management programs to reduce the consumption of fuel and electricity, and implementing value engineering reviews on construction projects to ensure that new facilities are designed and constructed in a cost-effective manner. [42]

Reviews suggest lowering costs by reducing or reclassifying staff

The reports found that the $312,969,052 in potential savings often could be achieved by eliminating staff positions. Implementing review recommendations to eliminate, hire, or reclassify staff would save the 11 school districts reviewed an estimated $93,209,804. (See Exhibit 20.) Often recommendations to eliminate positions were based on reviewing the districts' current staffing levels in light of industry staffing standards and the staffing levels in peer districts. School districts that adopt staffing or productivity standards can distribute staff equitably based on demonstrated needs. School districts can often achieve savings by monitoring the standards, establishing goals, and allocating staff in accordance with the standards. This can make budgeting more rational and consistent. Resource allocation—especially of personnel—should fluctuate with changes in student population and in facilities. For example, if student enrollment increases or decreases, or if facilities are expanded, corresponding staff needs increase or decrease according to the standards.

In total, the reviews identified 965 positions that could be eliminated. [43] This included 641 district-level positions that should be eliminated to increase efficiency, which could save the districts $86,176,097. (See Exhibit 20.) Almost three-quarters of the suggested district level staff cuts were clerical and support positions. The reviews also identified 324 school level positions that should be eliminated to increase efficiency and save districts $32,846,618. These positions included administrative and support staff, but not teachers. The positions most often recommended for elimination were school support staff, which accounted for 249 of the 324 suggested cuts.

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[42] Students considered under state guidelines to be close enough to the school to walk, and for whom the district receives no state revenue to transport, are "courtesy bus riders."

[43] The reports recommended eliminating 965 positions and creating 146 positions for a net elimination of 819 district- and school-level positions.

Exhibit 20
Reviews Identified $93.2 Million Over a Five-Year Period in Potential Cost Savings Through the Net Elimination and Reclassification of 819 Positions

Position Description[1]	Eliminate	Hire	Net Savings	Eliminate	Hire	Net
District-Level						
High-level administrators	$ 5,988,064	$ 0	$ 5,988,064	9	0	9
Mid-level administrators	17,198,344	10,805,639	6,392,705	60	45	15
Instructional administrators	5,502,934	3,058,378	2,444,556	25	14	11
Teachers on assignment	16,128,874	0	16,128,874	80	0	80
Clerical staff	15,536,071	1,126,045	14,410,026	110	7	103
Support staff	25,821,810	4,178,260	21,643,550	357	24	333
District Total	**$ 86,176,097**	**$ 19,168,322**	**$67,007,775**	**641**	**90**	**551**
School-Level						
High-level administrators	$ 8,800,096	$ 220,392	$ 8,579,704	33	1	32
Mid-level administrators	1,281,392	0	1,281,392	12	0	12
Instructional administrators	0	0	0	0	0	0
Instructional staff	7,364,072	805,355	6,558,717	30	18	12
Clerical staff	0	170,000	(170,000)	0	2	(2)
Support staff	15,401,058	2,642,129	12,758,929	249	35	214
School Total	**$ 32,846,618**	**$ 3,837,876**	**$29,008,742**	**324**	**56**	**268**
Up-/Down-Grade Staff			**(2,806,713)**			
Total	**$119,022,715**	**$23,006,198**	**$93,209,804**	**965**	**146**	**819**

[1] District high-level administrators include assistant superintendents, associated superintendents, area superintendents; district administrators include non-instructional positions; district instructional administrators include curriculum coordinators; district support staff include transportation positions; schoo. high-level administrators include assistant principals; school administrators include non-instructional positions; school support staff includes food service positions.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of performance and BFMP review recommendations.

School districts could generate more revenue

In addition to making changes that would reduce operating costs, school districts could significantly increase existing revenues. The reviews found that the 11 school districts could increase funds by $49,694,373 by maximizing opportunities to generate revenue. School districts receive the bulk of their funding from state and local tax revenue, but there are other sources of revenue that school districts can pursue and, if maximized, would provide significant additional funding. Recommendations to increase revenue included charging groups for the use of facilities during non-school hours, stop providing free meals to adults and custodians, revising meal prices to cover the cost of meals provided, and improving the tracking of services provided to students eligible for Medicaid reimbursement to collect funding. Schools could also maximize reimbursement from the federal government by increasing the number of economically disadvantaged children receiving free- or reduced-priced breakfasts and lunches.

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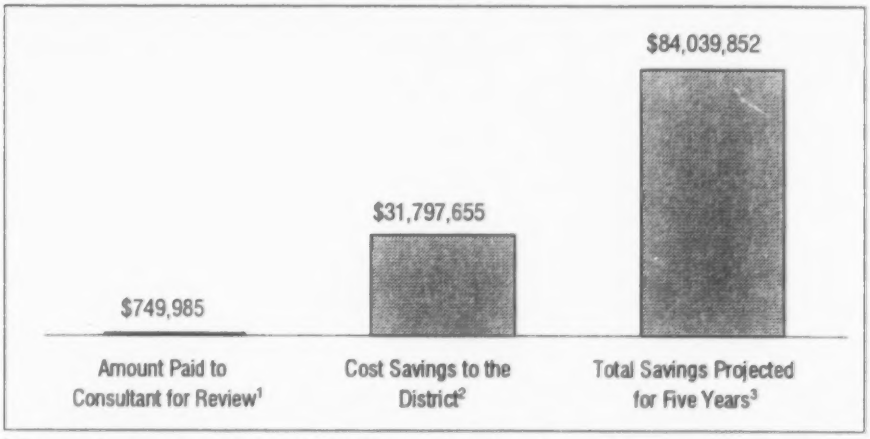
Reviews identified several other opportunities for cost savings

The reviews identified several other opportunities for cost savings and improvements. The largest category of these, $31,586,039, involved changes to the salaries and benefits offered to district employees. These changes included converting some full-time positions such as food service workers and bus drivers to part-time positions, eliminating benefits for part-time employees, and reducing the district's cost of health benefits to be more in line with peer districts. The reviews also recommended purchasing or selling district assets, which accounted for $2,126,185 of the projected net savings.

Benefits of school district reviews far outweigh costs

The 1999 Legislature directed OPPAGA to conduct post-review evaluations of the three school districts that underwent performance reviews during Fiscal Year 1996-97. Our evaluation examined the performance review recommendations that the district has implemented and the cost savings it has realized from these improvements. The benefit-to-cost ratio of school district reviews to date is substantial. The benefit-to-cost ratios for the three districts (Hamilton, Hillsborough, and Lee County school districts) in which OPPAGA has conducted follow-up reviews ranged from 8.7:1 to 65:1. As shown in Exhibit 21, the reported cost savings of these three reviews on average represent a 42:1 benefit-to-cost ratio.

Exhibit 21
Reported Cost Savings, on Average, Represent a 42:1 Benefit-to-Cost Ratio



[1] The consultants were paid a total of $749,985 to conduct the performance reviews. The cost of the reviews does not include the costs incurred by the school districts to participate in the review or OPPAGA's cost to administer the contract with the consultant.

[2] The cost savings are district estimates through March 2000, which represents slightly over three years of the five-year projections made by the consultant.

[3] Total savings projected for five years for Hamilton, Hillsborough, and Lee County school districts.

Source: OPPAGA Report Nos. 00-05, 00-06, and 00-09.

Conclusions and recommendations

School districts can significantly improve their use of resources. OPPAGA's reviews of 11 school districts have identified $312,969,052 over five years in potential cost savings and related fiscal effects in both operational and educational programs. The reviews identified a large number of ways to control costs, reduce overhead, streamline operations and improve services. While the type and amount of savings varied by district, the reviews revealed that by changing standard management practices and procedures school districts have the potential to save significant funds. Review findings suggest that other Florida school districts could significantly improve their use of resources by undergoing a similar review.

The 2000 Legislature directed OPPAGA to expand the Best Financial Management Practices to include school safety, community involvement, administrative and instructional technology, and educational service delivery. OPPAGA developed best practices for the additional areas, updated existing best practices, and submitted them to the Commissioner of Education for adoption. The Commissioner has since adopted the revised best practices, effective October 24, 2000. The first Best Financial Management Practices Review to use the new best practices will be conducted in the school district of Lake County, which commenced in early 2001.

In the years since its inception, there has been legislative interest to streamline and expand the Best Financial Management Practices Review Program. The 2000 Legislature considered, but did not pass, bills that would have integrated the Best Financial Management Practices Reviews and the school district performance reviews into a single process.[44] Consultants whose work would have been closely monitored by OPPAGA and the Auditor General would have conducted the studies. While the consultants would have conducted fieldwork, OPPAGA would have retained the authority to determine whether districts are meeting the best practices, which is needed to ensure statewide consistency. Combining the two programs would eliminate overlap between the two types of reviews, simplify administration, and funding for these reviews would enable all school districts to participate. Also, there is legislative interest in expanding the Best Financial Management Practices Review Program so that all school districts would be regularly reviewed on a prescribed yearly cycle.

The results of previous independent school district reviews demonstrate that the benefits associated with these kinds of reviews far outstrip the state's investment. Expanding the Best Financial Management Practices

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[44] See s. 11.515, *F.S.*

Review Program would assist school districts in improving their operations and lead to significant cost savings. Therefore, OPPAGA recommends that the Legislature consider implementing a state-funded, mandatory best practice review cycle of all school districts using the best practice method contracted to private consulting firms. Review of all school districts on a cycle, using the best practice method should help to improve efficient and effective use of school district resources. OPPAGA projects that implementing a 5-year cycle would require $4.2 million per year, while a 10-year cycle would cost $2.2 million per year. House Bill 269 filed in the 2001 session would implement this recommendation.

The Best Financial Management Practices Reviews are very complex projects that involve reviewing district operations at the individual program level. This is necessary in order to determine whether districts are using the best practices and to develop realistic cost savings recommendations that school districts can implement. The cost estimate for conducting the reviews on a seven-year cycle includes costs for both the contractor to conduct the review and OPPAGA to determine compliance with the best practices and to provide consultant oversight. OPPAGA's oversight will be very intensive and is needed to ensure that the best practices are consistently applied statewide and that the reviews are useful to the districts and the Legislature. Although the consultants will perform most fieldwork, OPPAGA will be responsible for the final determination of whether districts are complying with the best practices. This role is critical to ensuring that the reviews, although performed by different consultants, use consistent and stringent criteria to evaluate district use of the best practices.

The estimates of consultant costs are based on the costs of prior reviews. This cost estimate is based on an average of $250,000 per district, however, the actual cost per district would vary based on the size of the district to be reviewed and other district specific information such as financial conditions or other concerns. A best practices review of Miami-Dade would cost substantially more than an average district due to its size and fiscal challenges. Accordingly, the number of districts reviewed would vary each year; fewer than 10 districts would be reviewed in the year that Miami-Dade was scheduled, while more districts could be reviewed in years when few larger districts were scheduled.

To increase the usefulness of the school district review process, OPPAGA also recommends that the Department of Education work with OPPAGA to identify strategies to disseminate information to school districts on the results of past studies. This information should include commonly identified ways school districts can improve management, increase efficiency and effectiveness, and save funds. Strategies may include training, technical assistance papers, and a web-based database.

Appendix A

Statutory Requirements for Program Evaluation and Justification Review

Section 11.513, *Florida Statutes*, provides that OPPAGA Program Evaluation and Justification Reviews shall address nine issue areas. Our conclusions on these issues as they relate to the Department of Education's Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade Public Educational Program are summarized in Table A-1.

Table A-1
Summary of Program Evaluation and Justification Review of the Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade Educational Program

Issues	OPPAGA Conclusions
The identifiable cost of each program	Funding for public school education increased from $14,291,975,078 in 1999-2000 to $15,044,194,350 in 2000-01. The main sources of funding for public education include sales tax, utility bill taxes, lottery ticket sales, local property taxes, and federal trust funds. The majority (79%) of education funding is appropriated through the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) and categorical funding programs. The remaining 21% is allocated through other means such as contract and grants, and some stays with the Department of Education. For more information, see page 5.
The specific purpose of each program, as well as the specific public benefit derived therefrom	The purpose of the Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program is to ensure each student an equal opportunity to attain the highest levels of educational achievement, and to assist in preparing students to successfully participate in the workforce and pursue postsecondary education. For more information, see page 9.
Progress toward achieving the outputs and outcomes associated with each program	The Florida public school system's current performance measures did not include associated standards or benchmarks for the 1999-2000 school year. As such, we could not evaluate the system's progress towards meeting expected outcomes. For more information, see page 22.
An explanation of circumstances contributing to the state agency's ability to achieve, not achieve, or exceed its projected outputs and outcomes, as defined in s. 216.011, *F.S.*, associated with each program	The Florida public school system's PB² performance measures do not include associated standards or benchmarks for the 1999-2000 school year. As such, we could not evaluate the system's progress towards meeting expected outcomes. However, we found that overall performance already exceeds the standards set by the Legislature for the current school year. For more information, see page 22.
Alternative courses of action that would result in administering the program more efficiently or effectively	**Revising Research Availability.** The Department of Education should work with the school districts and consult with OPPAGA in revising and maintaining a web-based research bank. This revised research bank would house research on topics needed by school-based personnel in order to make well informed research-based decisions, including valid and reliable information on individual program effectiveness and efficiency, when available. School personnel many times do not have the time available to do research on specific initiatives. By revising its data dissemination, schools will be able to easily access the latest

Issues	OPPAGA Conclusions
	valid and reliable research on a topic. For more information, see page 44. **Align Planning Documents.** If the school improvement and planning process has all aspects aligned, school improvement plans, academic assistance and intervention plans, school district improvement plans, district strategic plans are all aligned with each other as well as with the school and district budget process the resulting plans may be more thorough, complete, and useful. For more information, see page 45. **Improve School District Performance Accountability.** School districts generally have inadequate accountability systems. The use of goals, objectives, performance measures, benchmarks, and evaluation varies by district and program. However, these activities should be greatly expanded. While districts have some components of a good accountability system in place or under development, components developed at different administrative levels and units generally do not relate to one another, thus resulting in a fragmented system and confusion among district staff. Best practice reviews provide action plans for school districts to establish performance accountability systems. For more information, see page 52. **Require School District Reviews.** Since 1996, reviews of 11 school districts serving more than 750,000 students have identified $312,969,052 in potential cost savings and related fiscal effects in both operational and education programs. While the type and amount of savings varied by district, the reviews revealed that by changing standard practices and procedures school districts have the potential to save significant funds. Review findings suggest that other Florida school districts could significantly improve their use of resources by undergoing a similar review. The Legislature should consider implementing a mandatory best practice review cycle of all school districts using the best practice method contracted to private consulting firms. Review of all school districts on a 5- to 10-year cycle, using the best practice method should help to improve efficient and effective use of school district resources. For more information on the cost implications of this recommendation, see page 60.
The consequences of discontinuing such program	Education is a constitutional value and considered a "public good" in that it benefits all Florida citizens not just the individual receiving education. For instance, an educated populace is considered critical to ensuring the health of the state's economy and the welfare of its citizens. The Florida Constitution places a high value on the education of the citizens that live within its borders and requires the state to maintain a high quality system of free and public schools. Discontinuing a public system of education may result in a large portion of the population remaining uneducated without the knowledge and skills to support itself financially. For more information, see page 9.
Determination as to public policy, which may include recommendations as to whether it would be sound public policy to continue or discontinue funding the program, either in whole or in part, in the existing manner	In the past two years the Governor and the Legislature have sought to examine the way Florida funds K-12 education to ensure that schools are adequately and equitability funded. These efforts include task forces to examine the Florida's funding system and equity within school districts, and reports on financial assistance to schools. For more information, see page 7.

Issues	OPPAGA Conclusions
Whether the information reported pursuant to s. 216.031(5), *F.S.*, has relevance and utility for the evaluation of each program	The Legislature should continue to develop and implement its accountability system for public schools. Several changes are planned during the next few years such as higher achievement level cut off scores and the calculation of individual student learning gains (i.e., the value-added system). These changes likely will strengthen accountability, but the department should make known the effect of those changes when program performance is reported for meaningful interpretation of program performance. The Legislature should implement additional measures in the areas of exceptional student education, for students enrolled in the first two years of ESOL Programs (English for Speakers of Other Languages), vocational education, fiscal efficiency, and articulation/readiness. For more information on these measures, see page 19.
Whether state agency management has established control systems sufficient to ensure that performance data are maintained and supported by state agency records and accurately presented in state agency performance reports	While the department's information system contains edits that identify some erroneous data, these edits cannot detect all errors. The department reviews data for reasonableness and provides reports to schools and school districts for their review. However, it does not check a sample of the performance data it receives against source documents. Florida law holds school districts responsible for the accuracy of all data transmitted to the department. The Department of Education's inspector general should further develop and implement the plan to monitor program performance data to ensure it is maintained and supported by agency records. The inspector general's plan should be developed further by being risk-based and detail more specifically the data elements to be examined, detail more specifically what data quality testing is necessary, and detail how the consistency of district coding of data will be assessed. For more information, see page 34.

Source: Developed by OPPAGA.

Appendix B

Methodology

During this project we visited 34 schools in five districts. The school districts we visited were selected using a multi-layered approach. We first compiled a list of the districts that had schools that received the performance grade of F in the school year 1999-2000. We then divided the districts by geographic location and size. We eliminated those school districts that had recently undergone a School District Performance Review or a Best Financial Management Practices Review by OPPAGA because we already compiled much data on those districts, and it would be repetitive to visit them again for the purpose of this report. After examining the school calendars of each of the remaining districts, we selected Marion, Palm Beach, Escambia, Gadsden, and Miami-Dade counties' school districts.

The selection of schools within the districts was done using a similar methodology. Individual schools were chosen based on their school performance grade, grade level, and geographic location within the district. Based on the number of team members available to participate in field visits, we decided to visit seven schools in each district. Within each district, we visited primarily D and F schools and one school that received a school recognition award for outstanding student performance.

When developing the interview questions and surveys, we used the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive School Reform Program's criteria to determine if the initiatives in use by the schools were selected based on accepted practices.

Appendix C

Grading Criteria Used in Current School Accountability System

Appendix C contains the four documents listed below.

- C-1: School Accountability Report Guide, June 2000. The 1999-2000 school accountability report guide (see page 67)
- C-2: School Accountability Report Guide, June 1999. The 1998-99 school accountability report guide, which details the criteria used to grade schools (see page 69)
- C-3: FCAT Achievement Levels. A description of the FCAT math and reading achievement levels and writing scores (see page 71)
- C-4: FCAT Achievement Level Cut Scores for Math and Reading Tests. The first and second achievement level cut scores for FCAT math and reading tests (see page 73)

C-1: School Accountability Report Guide, June 2000

A	B	C	D	F
• Meet Higher-Performing Criteria in reading, writing, and math for current year • Test at least 95% of eligible students[1] • Demonstrate substantial improvement[2] in reading • Maintain or improve reading scores of lowest-performing students[3] • Exhibit no substantial decline[4] in math or writing • Meet criteria for "other" data[5]	• Meet Higher-Performing Criteria in reading, writing, and math for current year • Test at least 90% of eligible students[1] • Maintain or improve reading scores of lowest-performing students[3]. • Meet criteria for "other" data[5]	• Meet Minimum Criteria in reading, writing and math for current year • Test at least 90% of eligible students[1] • Meet criteria for "other" data[5]	• Below Minimum Criteria in reading or writing or math for current year • Test at least 90% of eligible students[1] • Meet criteria for "other" data[5]	• Below Minimum Criteria in reading and writing and math for current year; OR • Meet "D" performance criteria, but test less than 90% of eligible students[1] without reasonable explanation.

PROCESS: Schools are evaluated primarily on the basis of performance data. However, the initial grade may be reduced by one level if the percentage of eligible students tested is below 90% after all extenuating circumstances have been considered.

[1]Eligible students also include speech-impaired, gifted, hospital/homebound, and Limited English Proficient students who have been in an ESOL program more than two years.

[2]Substantial improvement in reading means more than a two percentage point increase in students scoring FCAT Level 3 and above. If a school has 75% or more scoring FCAT Level 3 and above and not more than two percentage points decrease from the previous year, then substantial improvement is waived.

[3]The percentage of students who score in the lowest 25% in the state in reading (Level 1) must decrease or be maintained within two percentage points from the previous year. If a school has fewer than 30 students in Level 1, then the cumulative number of students scoring in Level 1 and Level 2 in reading must decrease or be maintained within two percentage points. If there are fewer than 30 students in Levels 1 and 2, this requirement will not apply.

[4]Decline means, a five or more percentage point decrease in students scoring FCAT Level 3 and above in math or writing.

[5]"Other" data for 1999-2000 include percentage of students absent more than 20 days, percentage suspended out of school and high school dropout rate. If all indicators exceed the state average by more than one standard deviation or have not improved from the previous year a school's final grade may ultimately be reduced one level unless there are extenuating circumstances involved. This provision applies to schools initially graded "C" and above.

NOTE: School participation rates and test results are based only on eligible students enrolled in both the October and February FTE surveys at the same school.

Higher Performing Criteria for A and B

FCAT	Reading	Math	Writing
Elementary	50% score Level 3 and above	50% score Level 3 and above	67% score Level 3 and above
Middle	50% score Level 3 and above	50% score Level 3 and above	75% score Level 3 and above
High	50% score Level 3 and above	50% score Level 3 and above	80% score Level 3 and above

Minimum Criteria for C, D, and F

FCAT	Reading	Math	Writing
Elementary	60% score Level 2 and above	60% score Level 2 and above	50% score Level 3 and above
Middle	60% score Level 2 and above	60% score Level 2 and above	67% score Level 3 and above
High	60% score Level 2 and above	60% score Level 2 and above	75% score Level 3 and above

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PURPOSE OF REPORT

The School Accountability Report is designed to identify high- and low-performing schools, stimulate academic improvement and summarize information about school achievement. The unit of reporting is regular elementary, middle and high schools within each district. Schools that have students in more than one category may have multiple reports. School performance is shown relative to state totals for all eligible students in regular elementary, middle, or high schools.

In accordance with Rule 6A-1.09981, FAC, grades are assigned to schools that have at least 30 eligible students in membership where statewide FCAT assessments are given. Some schools with grade level membership less than 30 that were graded in 1998-99 requested continued participation in the school grading system. Schools that have only one year of data are not graded, though current achievement levels are shown.

FCAT Achievement	Data are calculated for eligible students in regular elementary, middle, and high schools. Figures may vary slightly from total population data.
% in Lowest Reading Level(s)	Percentage scoring in FCAT Level 1, if there are at least 30 students. If not, lowest reading levels include FCAT Levels 1 and 2, if there are at least 30 students.
% Level 2 and Above FCAT Reading/Math	Percentage of students scoring in FCAT achievement levels 2 and above. Scores below minimum performance criteria are designated with a minus ("-") symbol.
% Level 3 and Above FCAT Reading/Math	Percentage of students scoring in FCAT achievement levels 3 and above. Scores that meet higher performing criteria are designated with a plus ("+") symbol.
% Level 3 and Above in Writing	Percentage of students scoring 3 or higher on FCAT Writing. "+" and "-" symbols also apply.
Estimated Percentage Tested	Estimated percentage of eligible students tested in reading, math, and writing for elementary, middle, and high schools. These estimates are based on students enrolled in October and February. The "-" symbol indicates estimated percentage tested was below 90%.
School Indicators	The percentage of students who received out-of-school suspensions, the percentage who were absent more than 20 days, and dropout rate are not included in this report for the following reasons. When all special circumstances were considered, no school failed to meet all criteria. Recent legislative changes remove suspension and attendance from school grades in 2000-2001 and beyond. These data have been previously provided in the School Indicators Report.

C-2: School Accountability Report Guide, June 1999

Purpose of Report

The School Accountability Report groups schools with similar performance characteristics. It identifies critically low schools, stimulates academic improvement and summarizes information about school achievement, learning environment, and student characteristics. The unit of reporting is each elementary, middle, and high school within the district. Schools that have students in more than one category may have multiple reports. School performance is shown relative to state averages for all elementary, middle, or high schools. State averages for 1999 and 1998 are shown above each column of data in the report. Averages for the most recent data are enclosed in brackets [ ] in the text of this guide.

Grades

C Current-year reading, writing and math data are at or above minimum criteria.

D Current-year reading or writing or math data are below minimum criteria.

F Current-year reading, writing and math data are below minimum criteria.

B Current-year reading, writing and math data are at or above higher performing criteria AND no subgroup [1] data are below minimum criteria AND at least 90% of standard curriculum [2] students were tested.

A Meet grade "B" criteria AND the percentage of students absent more than 20 days, percentage suspended and dropout rate (high schools) are *below* state averages AND there is substantial improvement [3] in reading AND there is no substantial decline [4] in writing and math AND at least 95% of standard curriculum students were tested.

NOTE: No school with less than 90% of standard curriculum students tested may be graded higher than "C." For any school with 80% or less of standard curriculum students tested, the school's grade will be incomplete (I) until this issue is resolved.

Minimum Criteria for School Performance - Grades C, D, and F

	FCAT Reading	FCAT Math	Florida Writes!
Elementary	60% score level 2 & above	60% score level 2 & above	50% score level 3 & above
Middle	60% score level 2 & above	60% score level 2 & above	67% score level 3 & above
High	60% score level 2 & above	60% score level 2 & above	75% score level 3 & above

Higher-Performing Criteria for School Performance - Grades B and A

	FCAT Reading	FCAT Math	Florida Writes!
Elementary	50% score level 3 & above	50% score level 3 & above	67% score level 3 & above
Middle	50% score level 3 & above	50% score level 3 & above	75% score level 3 & above
High	50% score level 3 & above	50% score level 3 & above	80% score level 3 & above

Scores that fall below minimum performance criteria are designated with a trailing "-." Data that do not meet higher performing criteria are followed by "–."

Scores that meet higher performing criteria are designated with a trailing "+." When subgroup performance falls below minimum performance criteria, the year is followed by "*."

[1]Under current rule subgroups include economically disadvantaged, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian and American Indian students.

[2]Standard curriculum students also include Language-Impaired, Speech-Impaired, Gifted, Hospital Homebound and LEP students who have been in an ESOL program more than two years.

[3]Substantial improvement in reading means more than two percentage points increase in students scoring in FCAT levels 3 and above. If the school has 75% or more students scoring at or above FCAT achievement level 3 AND not more than two percentage points decrease from the previous year then substantial improvement is waived.

[4]Substantial decline means five or more percentage points decline in the percentage of students scoring FCAT achievement level 3 and above in math OR five or more percentage points decline in the percentage of students scoring 3 and above on *Florida Writes!*

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Year	This report contains separate entries for the 1998-99 and 1997-98 school years. Changes in achievement, process or school characteristics can be seen by comparing data from the two years.
Student Achievement	Data are calculated for standard curriculum students in regular elementary, middle and high schools. Figures may vary slightly from total population data.
% Level 2 and Above FCAT Reading/Math	This is the percentage of students scoring in FCAT student achievement levels 2 and above.
% Level 3 and Above FCAT Reading/Math	This is the percentage of students scoring in FCAT student achievement levels 3 and above.
% 3 and Above on Writing	This is the percentage of students scoring 3 or higher on *Florida Writes!*
Estimated Percentage Tested	This is the estimated percent of students tested in Reading, Math and Writing for elementary, middle and high schools. These estimates are based on enrollment data in Survey 3. Exempted ESE and LEP students are not included in the estimates.

State Averages 1999	Reading		Math		Writing	
	Percent Scoring Level 2 & Above	Percent Scoring Level 3 & Above	Percent Scoring Level 2 & Above	Percent Scoring Level 3 & Above	Percent Scoring Level 3 & Above	Estimated % Tested
Elementary	70%	52%	72%	39%~	73%	98%
Middle	78%	49%~	73%	50%	88%	96%
High	72%	33%~	78%	51%	88%	88%~

School Indicators	The most recent data available are from the 1998 school year, is shown below.
Out-of-School Suspension Rate	This is the percentage of students who received out-of-school suspensions. For 1998, state averages were [2.2%] for elementary, [15.4%] for middle and [13.4%] for high schools.
% Absences >20 days	Percentage of students who were absent more than 20 days. State averages for 1998 were [8.7%] for elementary, [14.9%] for middle and [18.3%] for high schools.
Dropout Rate	For high schools, this is the percentage of students 16 years or older that were reported as dropouts at the end of the school year. The state average was [3.7%] for 1998.
Promotion Rate	For elementary and middle schools, this is the percentage of students who were promoted at the end of the school year. The average promotion rate was [97.8%] for elementary and [94.9%] for middle schools in 1998.
% on Free or Reduced Lunch	Percentage of students eligible for Free or Reduced Priced Lunch. State averages for 1998 were [56%] for elementary, [47%] for middle and [27%] for high schools. (NOTE: These data come from the Title I School Eligibility Survey.)
Mobility Rate	Percentage of students who transferred into or out of the school during the school year. The state averages for 1998 were [32%] for elementary, [28%] for middle and [27%] for high schools.

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C-3: FCAT Achievement Levels

Description of Math and Reading Scores. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) measures student performance on selected benchmarks in reading and mathematics that are defined by the Sunshine State Standards. The standards articulate challenging content that Florida students are expected to know. The standards were developed in seven content areas and were adopted by the State Board of Education in May 1996. All public schools are expected to teach students the content found in the Sunshine State Standards.

Students' proficiency in reading and mathematics in grades 4, 5, 8, and 10 is measured with the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The results of the tests will be reported in terms of the following five achievement levels.

- **Level 5** - Performance at this level indicates that the student has success with the most challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards. A Level 5 student answers most of the test questions correctly, including the most challenging questions.
- **Level 4** - Performance at this level indicates that the student has success with the challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards. A Level 4 student answers most of the questions correctly but may have only some success with questions that reflect the most challenging content.
- **Level 3** - Performance at this level indicates that the student has partial success with the challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards but performance is inconsistent. A Level 3 student answers many of the questions correctly but is generally less successful with questions that are most challenging.
- **Level 2** - Performance at this level indicates that the student has limited success with the challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards.
- **Level 1** - Performance at this level indicates that the student has little success with the challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards.

Description of Writing Scores. For the Florida Writing Assessment, students are given 45 minutes to read their assigned topics, plan what to write, and then write their responses. The descriptions of 11 possible scores from 6.0 - 1.0 are given below.

- **Score 6.0** - The writing focuses on the topic, is logically organized, and includes ample development of supporting ideas or examples. It demonstrates a mature command of language, including precision in word choice. Sentences vary in structure. Punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are generally correct.

- **Score 5.5** - The writing was given a 5 by one reader and 6 by the other reader.
- **Score 5.0** - The writing focuses on the topic with adequate development of supporting ideas or examples. It has an organizational pattern, though lapses may occur. Word choice is adequate. Sentences vary in structure. Punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are generally correct.
- **Score 4.5** - The writing was given a 4 by one reader and a 5 by the other reader.
- **Score 4.0** - The writing focuses on the topic, though it may contain extraneous information. An organizational pattern is evident, but lapses may occur. Some supporting ideas contain specifics and details, but others are not developed. Word choice is adequate. Sentences vary somewhat in structure, though many are simple. Punctuation and capitalization are sometimes incorrect, but most commonly used words are spelled correctly.
- **Score 3.5** - The writing was given a 3 by one reader and a 4 by the other reader.
- **Score 3.0** - The writing generally focuses on the topic, though it may contain extraneous information. An organizational pattern has been attempted, but lapses may occur. Some of the supporting ideas or examples may not be developed. Word choice is adequate. Sentences vary somewhat in structure, though many are simple. Punctuation and capitalization are sometimes incorrect, but most commonly used words are spelled correctly.
- **Score 2.5** - The writing was given a 2 by one reader and a 3 by the other reader.
- **Score 2.0** - The writing may be slightly related to the topic or offer little relevant information and few supporting ideas or examples. There is little evidence of an organizational pattern. Word choice may be limited or immature. Sentences may be limited to simple constructions. Frequent errors may occur in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.
- **Score 1.5** - The writing was given a 1 by one reader and a 2 by the other reader.
- **Score 1.0** - The writing may only minimally address the topic because there is little or no development of supporting ideas or examples. No organizational pattern is evident. Ideas are provided through lists, and word choice is limited or immature. Unrelated information may be included. Frequent errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling may impede communication.

C-4: FCAT Achievement Level Cut Scores for Math and Reading Tests

According to State Board of Education Rule (6A-1.09422, *Florida Administrative Code*) the current FCAT achievement levels are valid through December 31, 2001, and will be raised beginning on January 1, 2002. The FCAT achievement levels are the cut-off scores for each area tested by the FCAT that are then used as one component in determining the school performance grade. The adopted rule provides for a two-stage implementation process in which the first level is in effect for three years before moving to the higher second stage.

Reading Step 1	Achievement Levels (Effective 1998-99 through 2000-01)				
Grade Tested	**Level 1**	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**	**Level 5**
4	Less than 275	275	299	339	386
8	Less than 271	271	310	350	394
10	Less than 287	287	327	355	372
Reading Step 2	**Achievement Levels (Effective 2001-02 and Beyond)**				
Grade Tested	**Level 1**	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**	**Level 5**
4	Less than 288	288	312	352	399
8	Less than 284	284	323	363	407
10	Less than 300	300	340	368	385
Mathematics Step 1	**Achievement Levels (Effective 1998-99 through 2000-01)**				
Grade Tested	**Level 1**	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**	**Level 5**
5	Less than 288	288	326	355	395
8	Less than 280	280	310	347	371
10	Less than 287	287	315	340	375
Mathematics Step 2	**Achievement Levels (Effective 2001-02 and Beyond)**				
Grade Tested	**Level 1**	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**	**Level 5**
5	Less than 301	301	339	368	408
8	Less than 293	293	323	360	384
10	Less than 300	300	328	353	388

Source: Department of Education.

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Appendix D

Best Financial Management Practices for Performance Accountability Systems

Goals (A, B, C . . .), Best Practices (1, 2, 3 . . .), Indicators (a, b, c . . .)
Goal A: The district is accountable to parents and other taxpayers for the performance, efficiency, and effectiveness of individual educational and operational programs.
1. The district has clearly stated goals and measurable objectives that can be achieved within budget for each major educational and operational program. These major programs are: • Educational Programs: Basic Education (K-3, 4-8, 9-12), Exceptional Student Education, Vocational/Technical Education, and English for Speakers of Other Languages. • Operational: Facilities Construction, Facilities Maintenance, Personnel, Asset and Risk Management, Financial Management, Purchasing, Transportation, Food Services, and Safety and Security.
a. The district can demonstrate that it has clearly stated goals and measurable objectives for these programs. [1]
b. Program goals reflect the intent (purpose) and expected outcomes of the program. [2]
c. Goals and outcome-oriented objectives for each major program can be achieved within budget, are up-to-date, in writing, easy to identify, and located in a single document.
d. Outcome-oriented objectives for each major program are consistent with the program's goals. [3]
e. Outcome-oriented objectives address the major aspects of the program's purpose and expenditures.
f. Program goals and outcome-oriented objectives are consistent with the district's strategic plan and board priorities.
g. The district can demonstrate that it measures progress toward meeting these program goals and outcome-oriented objectives.

[1] Each district should define those programs considered "major" within these two broad areas. At a minimum, they should include the programs listed. However, the district should have some defensible, logical criteria to identify major educational and operational programs. Criteria may include funding, number of children or full-time equivalents (FTEs) served, or state or federal requirements.

[2] A "program goal" is a long-range end towards which a program directs its efforts and should relate to the district's mission, values, goals, priorities, and expectations; support state educational goals; reflect the intent (purpose) of the program; and incorporate state and federal program requirements.

[3] A "program objective" is an action statement which defines how program goals will be achieved and should be either short-term (two to three years) or mid-term (four to five years); support the program's goals; address major aspects of the program's purpose and expenditures; be specific; be easily understood; be challenging but achievable; be measurable and quantifiable; identify data needed to assess whether progress toward an objective is being made; and indicate the performance outcome (result) or improvement target desired. For academic programs, objectives should be stated in terms of student outcomes (that is, the effect the program will have on participating students if the program is successful). Operational program objectives should be stated in terms of the quality and cost of service provided.

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Goals (A, B, C . . .), Best Practices (1, 2, 3 . . .), Indicators (a, b, c . . .)
2. The district uses appropriate performance and cost-efficiency measures and interpretive benchmarks to evaluate its major educational and operational programs and uses these in management decision making.
a. The district has established appropriate performance and cost-efficiency measures and benchmarks that are not cumbersome to use, expensive to implement, or difficult for the public to understand, but are related to the activities of the program. [4,5]
b. Performance measures and benchmarks link directly to the expected outcomes of each program and assist the district in determining whether it is achieving the program's goals and outcome-oriented objectives.
c. Performance and cost-efficiency measures and benchmarks for each major program are up-to-date, in writing, easy to identify, and located in a single document.
d. The performance measures for each program include linked input, output, and outcome measures.
e. Performance measures link program performance to program costs.
f. Benchmarks are based on each program's performance and cost-efficiency measures. Benchmarks include appropriate standards from comparable school districts, government agencies, and private industry.
3. The district regularly assesses the performance and cost of its major educational and operational programs using performance measures and benchmark data and analyzes potential cost savings and/or cost avoidance of alternatives, such as outside contracting and privatization.
a. The district routinely tracks performance measures and compares this data to established benchmarks to assess how well educational and operational programs are meeting their goals and outcome-oriented objectives. [6]
b. The district can demonstrate that it determines the potential of alternative service delivery methods to save costs. The alternative service delivery method may include contracting out specific tasks or privatizing entire service delivery areas.
c. The results of routine assessments are summarized in writing and shared with program staff and, when necessary, action is taken to improve program performance and cost-efficiency.
d. The district has a process in place to provide school board members and top-level administrators with key assessment information on the performance and cost-efficiency of its major educational and operational programs.

[4] "Performance and cost-efficiency measures" are data collected to indicate progress toward program goals and objectives and should be logically related to the program's primary purpose, goals, and objectives; comprehensive and easy to understand; able to be tracked over a long period of time; show a clear relationship to intended outcomes; related to the district's primary mission, goals, and objectives as stated in its strategic plan; assess whether the program is achieving its fundamental goals and objectives; used to evaluate program performance and cost efficiency; and able to link program performance to program costs so they are useful for budgetary decisions. There are three categories of performance and cost-efficiency measures. (1) Inputs are measures of any demands or resources which affect outputs or outcomes. Inputs include staff, financial resources, equipment, and supplies. (2) Outputs are measures of products or services produced by a program or number of entities receiving services. Outputs include the actual number of students receiving educational program services, number of applications processed, gross square footage monitored for security purposes, and miles of school bus service traveled. Output measures can be used to assess efficiency and work load issues. (3) Outcomes are measures of the extent to which a program is resulting in the consequences or public benefit intended. Outcomes include percentage of students who showed mastery of writing skills through their scores on Florida Writes!, percentage of vocational certificate completers who were placed in a job related to their education, and percentage of graduating seniors who needed no remediation upon entry into a college or university. Outcome measures can be used to evaluate the actual effect of a program or service and identify potential improvements in program design and processes.

[5] "Benchmarking" is comparing the actual performance and cost of major programs and services to acceptable standards, including the performance of other organizations, to identify differences and opportunities for improvement. Benchmarks should include comparisons to other school districts, government agencies, and private industry that provide the same or similar services; include comparisons to best-in-class organizations (models), best practices, and generally accepted industry standards; clearly define acceptable performance targets/standards (in the top 10 school districts, in the middle of peer districts, within 10% of the industry average, etc.) to assess whether performance and cost expectations have been met; be easy to understand and make sense; show a clear relationship to critical outcomes; be based on reliable and comparable data; be used to identify reasons for differences in performance or costs and to make improvements; and be developed at the same time as goals and objectives and updated annually.

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Goals (A, B, C . . .), Best Practices (1, 2, 3 . .), Indicators (a, b, c . . .)
4. The district formally evaluates the performance and cost of its major educational and operational programs and uses evaluation results to improve program performance and cost-efficiency.
a. The district has established and implemented an annual schedule to conduct formal evaluations, as appropriate, of major educational and operational programs using the results of routine assessments and other reasonable criteria as factors in selecting programs for evaluation. [7]
b. At a minimum, the district's formal evaluations examine whether the program is meeting its intended purpose, goals, and outcome-oriented objectives within budget in the most cost-efficient manner.
c. The findings and recommendations of the district's formal evaluations are clearly and directly stated, understandable, and do not require undue assistance to interpret their meaning or significance.
d. The district issues a report that includes findings and recommendations for improvement for each formal evaluation conducted.
e. The district has a process in place to provide school board members and top-level administrators with formal evaluation reports that include findings on and recommendations to improve the performance and cost-efficiency of its major educational and operational programs.
f. The district can demonstrate specifically how it uses formal evaluation results to improve program performance and cost-efficiency.
5. The district clearly reports on the performance and cost-efficiency of its major educational and operational programs to ensure accountability to parents and other taxpayers.
a. The district can demonstrate that it publicly reports on the performance and cost-efficiency of its major educational and operational programs.
b. The district can demonstrate that it timely reports this information to school advisory councils, parents, and other taxpayers in a manner that is clear and understandable and does not require undue assistance to interpret its meaning or significance.
c. The district has established a mechanism to receive and respond to feedback from parents and other taxpayers as an avenue of accountability to improve poor performance and inefficiency.

[6] Evaluation, including periodic assessments and formal program evaluation, is an essential component of an effective performance accountability system because it enables a school district to identify ways to improve performance and save resources. Periodic assessment provides a means to pull together basic data on a regular basis to determine and communicate to district management how well a program is meeting its goals and objectives.

[7] Formal program evaluations are more comprehensive and generally less frequent than assessments. Formal program evaluations focus on program results and effectiveness, are independently conducted, and examine broad issues such as program structure and administration and whether the program is meeting its intended purpose.

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Appendix E

School District Reviews Have Identified Common Cost Savings

OPPAGA's reviews of 11 school districts that have been subject to a Performance and/or Best Financial Management Practices Review have identified potential positive fiscal effects of $312,969,052. These reviews assessed district operational and education programs. The majority (89%) of these cost-saving recommendations were in six common areas—facilities use and management, educational service delivery, school district organization, transportation, personnel management, and food service. Table E-1 lists these common conclusions and recommendations. These recommendations are likely applicable to other school districts across the state.

Table E-1
Sample of School District Review Recommendations

Area	Recommendation
Facilities Use and Management	▪ Eliminate custodial staff so that the overall average is based on the industry standard of one custodian per 19,000 gross square feet of space. ▪ Implement multi-track, year round schools to increase student station capacity. ▪ Consider implementation of energy management program to reduce the consumption of energy. ▪ Implement value engineering to identify alternative designs to reduce construction costs and standardize designs and specifications to the greatest extent possible. ▪ Implement passive order system to set custodial material standards to reduce the amount of material used to a best practice level to reduce cleaning material costs.
Educational Service Delivery	▪ Expand Medicaid reimbursement to increase federal participation and place students in Exceptional Student Education programs only up to state caps. ▪ Combine programs such as middle and high into secondary education to eliminate duplication in staffing. ▪ Eliminate clerical and support staff positions by streamlining and combining programs.
School District Organization and Management	▪ Improve projections of the number of at-risk and exceptional students the district will serve to stay within the maximum cap set by the state. ▪ Reduce teachers on assignment to no more than 1% so that they may be in the classroom. ▪ Run fee-based summer gifted program. ▪ Eliminate district and school high level administrators.

39 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Area	Recommendation
Transportation	▪ Reduce bus routes by making routing changes and eliminate bus operator positions. ▪ Eliminate purchase of new buses, sell buses, and change replacement policy, includes saving on maintenance and fuel charges. ▪ Use HART line passes in place of activity buses for low-density programs. ▪ Eliminate standby time by eliminating guarantee of six working hours per day for bus drivers.
Personnel Management	▪ Reduce cost of employer health benefits by providing no more and paying no more than peer districts average. ▪ Reduce salaries through improved labor negotiations to pay more in line with peer districts. ▪ Eliminate upper and lower district staff positions.
Food Service	▪ Raise selected meal prices to cover costs of meal production. ▪ Discontinue free meals for staff. ▪ Increase student participation and increase participation in free/reduced lunch program. ▪ Convert full-time staff to half/part-time staff and eliminate benefits. ▪ Eliminate half of the paid cafeteria monitors and use site-based staff to help.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of performance and BFMP review recommendations.

Appendix F

Response from the Department of Education

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.45(7)(d), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Commissioner of the Department of Education to review and respond.

The Commissioner's written response is reprinted herein beginning on page 80.

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

CHARLIE CRIST
COMMISSIONER

March 27, 2001

Mr. John W. Turcotte, Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis
and Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street, Room 312
Claude Pepper Building
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Dear Mr. Turcotte:

My office has received a copy of the document entitled ***Justification Review: Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program*** recently completed by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA). We appreciate the collegial atmosphere in which this report was generated and recognize the extensive efforts that your staff made to address issues of accuracy. We find this report to be a fair representation of current status and compliment your office for its diligence.

There is only one aspect of the report that we believe merits further elaboration - vocational education. While it is true that vocational education data is not utilized in the grading of public schools, it is gathered for federal funding purposes. Performance measures and program standards are required by federal law.

Much of this report is dedicated to the issue of school district efficiency. We find this to be most appropriate in view of our constitutional requirement to have a system of public education that is uniform, safe, efficient and of high quality.

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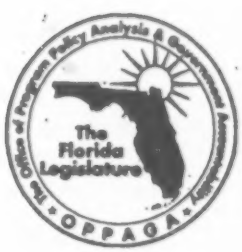
Your recommendations complement our support of the **Sharpening the Pencil** legislation that is currently being considered by the Florida Legislature. I am pleased to have participated in the conception of this proposal.

Finally, this report offers numerous recommendations for refinement of our K-12 public education program. We will work responsibly toward prioritizing and implementing these improvements.

Thank you for your interest in Florida schools.

Sincerely,

/s/
Charlie Crist



This office provides objective, independent, professional analyses of state policies and services to assist the Florida Legislature in decision making, to ensure government accountability, and to recommend the best use of public resources.